

H I T H E R S E A M E R E

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HITHERSEA MERE

BY

LADY AUGUSTA NOEL

UTHOR OF 'WANDERING WILLIE,' 'FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION,' ETC.

'Only the actions of the just,
Smell sweet and blossom in their dust.'—*Shirley*

London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

AND NEW YORK

1887

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HITHERSEA MERE

CHAPTER I

‘There is a time for everything.’

WITHOUT doubt Jasper Berkeley Somerville was a great man.

Theologian, poet, philosopher, divine, above all, philanthropist, he fought a good fight in his day against the sin, and doubt, and sorrow, of a sinning, doubting, sorrow-stricken world.

He only laid down the weapons of his warfare with his life. The last sentence which he wrote he left unfinished. The last cause he strove for had not been won.

With the tidings of his sudden death there came to all England a sense of loss and of sorrow, as for a great brother departed.

To his own people, who loved him, it was for a time as if the sun had fallen from the heavens, and all brightness and glory had faded from the earth. On the day of his funeral it seemed to Rhona Somerville, his daughter, that the echo of the footsteps of a great company of mourners and the voice of their weeping, comforted her, and yet left her in a strange solitude, as she stood clasping her mother's hand. For of their loss, of the utter blankness which had become, what could the world know?

Only it missed a friend—a teacher—an elder—the hand and heart of a strong helper; a lot of good-missed him Rhona could rejoice. She wanted to dance

but her father had been all in all to her. She honestly believed that her life was ended.

A year and a half passed, and then one day there came a letter which gave something like a purpose and a hope to her once more.

She and her mother were in Switzerland.

From a clear blue sky the sun was shining on pine-woods, on green slopes of grass, on tall cliffs, and distant peaks of snow. Far and near cattle bells were tinkling, set to the music of rushing, falling water. A dog barked, herding the cows on the grassy hill. Close under the window of the little inn the hollow noise of horses' hoofs sounded now and again, as they crossed the wooden bridge over a gray torrent. For the rest there was such silence as best befits the mountains.

Silent it certainly was, silent and remote, that chalet hotel of Rosenlaui, in the heart of the Bernese Oberland, built high up among the pines and meadows, and sheltered under the huge peaks that form the summit of the Wetterhorn.

Very few are the travellers who come and go, crossing the Scheideck Pass, and stopping, rather way-worn little cavalcades, to eat and rest at Rosenlaui. Scarcely any one lingers for more than a night—therein lies the charm of the place. All pass on to gayer Grindelwald, or go winding down the mountain side to pretty Meiringen in the valley.

And because it is little tourist-haunted, and that its high, pure air is singularly fresh and clear, Laurence Somerville one glowing August day brought his mother and sister up the long steep track that winds and twists skyward through fragrant pine-woods, and overhangs the torrent, whose waters are seen boiling and dashing far below. At Rosenlaui he found them, while he made raids himself on to all the neighbouring mountain tops. And they abided his pleasure will-
for the secluded little place had caught Rhona's fancy
with magnificent views of the snow mountains—the gray-
and the dainty vignettes of loveliness—wood,
torrent—that she discovered within a stone's
throw.

The days flitted by dreamily enough. Sometimes a thunderstorm rumbled and rattled among the crags up above their heads, or a mist floated in wan folds round their jagged sides. But for the most part the August sun shone serenely, gleaming against the solemn ice-blue of the glacier, and touching with silver the gray and white waves of the torrent that flows from it through emerald pasture lands.

And then one evening Laurence came, unconscious messenger of change, with an English letter in his pocket.

He had been tramping and scrambling, accomplishing 'ascensions,' getting himself roasted by the sun, frozen in the snow, suspended over crevasses, in perils oft, starved with hunger, parched with thirst, walking incredible distances, and altogether enjoying life as only people of twenty years old or thereabouts have the capacity to enjoy.

Never was there a fairer specimen of an Oxonian than this stalwart Laurence, in his gray mountaineering suit and hob-nailed boots. Scores of young fellows of the same type are to be found each summer at Zermatt, or Chamounix, or Interlachen, just as happy-looking and sunburnt, their hair as closely cropped, their faces dyed as deep a brick-dust colour, their foreheads showing as startlingly white, above what Laurence calls the hat-line.

A while ago, on this especial evening, he had come striding gaily over the Scheideck from Lauterbrunnen with the pockets of his gray coat stuffed with English letters. Neither he nor his sister Rhona cared much about letters that could be 'home letters' no longer. Alas, the dearly-loved old home was but a dream now! So Laurence put the unopened packet into his mother's lap as she sat by the window, and announced that he was famishing. In vain Rhona reminded him of the impending table-d'hôte. He ordered her to cut him one hunch after another from a long brown loaf, while he filled his glass over and over again with the foaming milk which Binchen, the smiling waitress, brought him fresh from the milking châlet.

'No time like the present, Rhona. Well, Mürren was worth two of this place—such a jolly view, and a lot of good-natured people staying in the hotel. They wanted to dance

every night, only all the men were dead-beat, and had only hob-nailed boots to dance in. No!' replying to Rhona's gesture, as she pointed towards her mother; 'oh no, of course it would never have done for *her*; of course not. That was why I brought you here while I did my climbing—nice peaceable little place! Mürren would not have been at all the thing for mother!'

Hearing her name, Mrs. Somerville glanced round absently. Her lap was full of letters. The evening light fell on her fair, delicately-cut features. She was just the sort of mother on whom sons lavish a sort of protecting adoration, and whom young daughters—clever and impetuous as Rhona was—find it hard at times to understand. It was a beautiful face, full of sweetness and gentle placidity, the dark eyes very soft and dreamy under their pencilled brows, the rippling mass of hair above her brow more than gray, almost white. But gray hair does not always give a look of age. On this face it simply bestowed a character and an expression of pathos that it might otherwise have lacked.

'No!' Laurence went on, dipping his spoon into a dish of honey, and pensively twisting it round and round to stop the golden flow. 'No, Mürren could never have been thought of for the mother. It rather bored me after a day or two; but it was all I could do to get Jem Beresford away yesterday.'

'What has Jem Beresford been about?' asked Rhona, falling unawares into the mountaineering jargon that prevails in a Swiss hotel. 'Has he got many mountains this year?'

'He has been in awful luck. He has done the Jungfrau, and the Mönch, and the Blümless, and the Wetterhorn. That is something like a grind, you know. It is hard lines that I did not get that;' and his blue eyes clouded over quite mournfully.

'You boy—as if you had not had enough climbing to satisfy any reasonable being.'

'Ah! if only I could have managed the Kleine Wellhorn up there,' pointing out of the window at a savage, inhospitable-looking peak. 'No one has done that yet, you know; but I feel confident I could, and then I could go home happy.'

‘Rhona!’

Their mother’s low voice interrupted them. There was a tinge of trouble in it, and Laurence jumped up and went to her, putting his hand caressingly on her shoulder. ‘No bad news, mother?’

‘No, not bad news; not any news at all. I have had a letter from the dean.’

Laurence screwed up his lips as if he was going to whistle. The Dean of Morechester had been the bore of his boyhood. But Rhona gave him a reproving look. Had not the Dean of Morechester been one of her father’s most loyal and devoted friends? Had he not almost worshipped him? Good old dean! neither she nor Laurence could ever forget that.

‘The dean has written, and I should wish you to read his letter—both of you.’

Laurence looked rebelliously at the closely-written sheets, as Rhona took them from Mrs. Somerville’s hand, and he muttered something about meaning to run up to the glacier before dinner. Rhona’s colour, however, was deepening and her eyes darkening, as she glanced over the first page. ‘It is something about father,’ she said in a low voice; and she began to read aloud.

Still grumbling under his breath, Laurence balanced himself on the window-sill, and leaning out perilously far, fixed his wistful eyes on the sharp perpendicular spires of the Kleine Wellhorn.

This is a portion of the letter, which was listened to by Mrs. Somerville, with her hand shading her eyes, and read by Rhona with a quickly beating heart.

Some excuse for Laurence might perchance be found in it.

‘I have had it,’ said the letter, ‘much on my mind to write to you of late; and my purpose has been strengthened by a visit which I lately paid to Oxford——’

‘That’s a mercy, at all events, he won’t be going there again next term,’ muttered Laurence.

‘—I lately paid to Oxford,’ read on Rhona, ignoring him indignantly, ‘where I enjoyed the privilege of meeting several of your dear husband’s friends, and of conversing

with them on a subject that was occupying my own thoughts——’

‘Morechester Cathedral Restoration Fund,’ Laurence again broke in ; but Rhona silenced him with a look.

‘There is but one opinion among all whom I addressed on the question which I felt it my duty to lay before them, which is this—that a Life of him whom all England has, in as far as it knew him, most truly loved and as sincerely mourned, should be prepared for publication. The world, my dear Mrs. Somerville, should know the great man it has lost.’

A light came into Rhona’s eyes, her colour rose. For a moment her voice failed. Neither Laurence nor his mother spoke.

‘The records of a life so noble,’ went on Rhona directly she could speak clearly, ‘would be most useful, most instructive ! A character combining, as did his, so many diverse gifts and graces, ought to be held up for the example and edification of a generation that is less simple, less earnest, less self-forgetting (to my poor judgment), than the one which he we mourn fitly represented. The question remains, Who is to undertake a task doubtless onerous and responsible ? Who, my dear madam, could be so fit as yourself to become the biographer of your distinguished husband?’

Rhona stopped short in intense surprise. The attention of Laurence had begun to wander a moment or two before. An arrival had caught his eyes down yonder at the hotel door. A stout lady on a pony and a slim hot gentleman in his shirt-sleeves were crossing the wooden bridge over the torrent. The shrill dog had abandoned the cows to their fate, and for some reason best known to himself was barking vociferously, and flying at the unoffending travellers open-mouthed. The landlord and both guides rushed to the rescue. It was an interesting moment ; but at the first mention of the dean’s design Laurence swung himself abruptly back into the room and took his mother’s hand in his. Protecting and compassionate he stood facing Rhona with a frown, while she, in a quivering voice, began another sentence in the letter.

‘To no one could his untiring devotion, his self-abnegation, his large-hearted piety, have been so clearly revealed as to you. His writings have proved beyond question the brilliance of his intellectual gifts; but the outer world should hear what manner of man he was, what were the springs which moved his being, and from what Divine source he drew his inspiration.’

The long-winded sentences were beginning to tell heavily on Laurence. He could barely refrain from tearing the letter out of his sister’s hand. The dean in very presence seemed to be standing among them—the dean with his gaiters, and his white whiskers, and his erudition.

He could not look at things with Rhona’s eyes. To her it mattered little whether the dean used plain words or pedantic ones, when he spoke thus of her father.

Yet the same rush of old associations, the same wave of memory, was sweeping over both brother and sister. Laurence grew angry with what he fancied was the womanly softness that came with it; Rhona did not think about herself at all. She simply gloried in her father’s praise.

The same picture was before the eyes of each—the dear old-fashioned house in the Close at Morechester, which was dearer to them both than any other spot in the world.

Morechester! There was magic in the very name. It used to be their holiday home, and the summer months of their father’s residence in the old canon’s lodgings were the very brightest in the year.

The remainder of it was spent in the huge, grimy, busy, manufacturing town up in the North, of which he was rector. There he never had time for anything but work—hard, incessant work such as few men encounter, or even dream of encountering, in their lives. But at Morechester it was different. At Morechester he had breathing time. For the most part his books were written there—those books which made his fame, and were the glory of Rhona’s life. In the quaint walled garden underneath the shadow of the cathedral towers, he used to saunter up and down with his hands behind his back, seemingly idle, really hard at work, ‘inventing,’ as his children used to say.

The old house—the delectable old house—was roomy, and like a picture to look at ; and its nest of queer-shaped, many-cornered, tiny guest-chambers up in the roof, were pretty constantly tenanted by visitors, more or less distinguished. At home, up in the North, there was no time to receive visitors, but at Morechester Jasper Somerville kept open house.

Old friends gathered round him there, bringing new friends in their train. Literary and scientific men, writers, statesmen, workers, came to discuss with him the burning questions of the day. Learned foreigners appeared from the far-off corners of the world, and an unfailing stream of Transatlantic cousins who looked on Morechester Close as a sort of shrine, where they went on pilgrimage, to hear the great author talk, and to visit the little panelled study, like a carved wooden box, in which their beloved books were written.

Sometimes the guests overflowed into the hospitable deanery next door. Who so proud then, or so happily fussy as the dean ? Bright days, grand and fair days, with each of which the dean had associated himself.

It was half unwillingly that Laurence's memory carried him back to the old home. But there was no help for it. He was in the dining-room again. Dinner was just over. Outside, the cathedral towers were reddening in the sunset, the rooks were wheeling round them, and placidly sailing homewards through the freshening air. Inside the room the dean sat opposite his father, his monotonous voice droning away—the restoration of the Lady Chapel—the Ecclesiastical Commissioners—Early English Arches—the County Subscription List—one subject was just as good to Laurence as another. He felt again the old tingle of impatience ; and then he seemed once more to meet his father's bright eyes, glancing at him as he fidgeted in his chair, with a gleam in them of amused condolence, and a kindly exhortation to patience and fortitude.

It was that recollection that had kept him silent hitherto ; but when Rhona looked up in her impetuous way, and began to speak, the impulse of contradiction was too strong for him.

'The dean is right, mother,' the girl said, eagerly; 'I have thought of it before. His life ought to be written; we owe it to the world——'

'Well,' Laurence broke in, 'I don't see that at all. I can't see what business it is, either, of the dean's. What does it concern him whether mother chooses to write my father's life or not?'

'It concerns him—it concerns every one. Our father belongs to England—to his generation. The whole world has a right to ask to hear about him.'

'But I don't see that any one has a right to dictate to mother what she is to do. I don't choose to have my mother worried—— Yes, of course it worries her; can't you see for yourself?'

'Worried, Laurie!' said his sister hotly, 'worried by having the keeping of our father's fame? It is the greatest honour to her. I never liked the dean half so much as for writing that sentence, "The world should know the great man it has lost." Good old dean!'

'Then let him tell the world himself,' rather sulkily.

Rhona's eyes flashed. 'He—the old dean—write our father's life! The dean!'

'Rhona, it is my business to see after mother. I am not going to have her worried by you, or by the dean, or any one else. I say, mother,' and he turned towards her, still holding her hand tightly clasped in his, 'put that pompous old fellow's prig of a letter into the fire, and don't give it another thought. I know it worries you.'

She had been looking absently at her two children, turning her eyes from one to the other as they talked, but only half hearing what they said. Now she roused herself.

'But, my dear boy, I cannot tell. It is most important, and it comes so suddenly, and I am so unworthy. If only I could know what your father would have said.'

'My father! He would have hated having his life written, you may be pretty sure of that. No one ever abominated publicity, and flattery, and humbug more than my father did.'

'And no one ever forgot himself or his own likes or

dislikes more utterly when the good of others was concerned,' interposed Rhona. 'You know that, Laurie. I can hear him,' and with her raised head and parted lips, she looked as if she really saw her father and was listening to his voice—'I can hear him telling mother not to consider his wishes, but to think only of what would most help the world.'

Mrs. Somerville drew a deep sigh, and Laurence was roused into fresh indignation on her behalf.

'Rhona, one would say no one had ever known my father except yourself. Surely mother must know rather better than you can what his wishes were.'

The words, for some reason, seemed to stab Rhona to the heart. She tried vainly to keep her voice steady as she said :

'Mother was saying that she wished she knew——'

'And you can tell her? Really, Rhona——'

His mother put her hand gently on his arm.

'Rhona is right, my boy. She was a great deal with her dear father. It may be that she does know better than I do what his wishes would have been.'

Rhona turned abruptly to the window, then came back, still struggling to speak calmly. 'I only meant that I thought he would bid mother to be of good courage.'

'And I tell you he would have sent that meddlesome old don to Jericho,' said Laurence, out of patience. 'Why, Rhona,' following her and pulling her arm, for she had turned her face away, 'why, Rhona, you can't have thought. Don't you know,' and the colour came in a swift rush all over his sunburnt face, while his voice dropped into a shy, gruff whisper, 'you would have to publish all about his private thoughts—his religious feelings, I mean—and all that sort of thing? They always do in Lives.'

Rhona broke into a short, sudden, irresistible laugh. Even Mrs. Somerville smiled, and poor Laurence walked away in a huff.

'Well, if you don't mind that, I don't know what on earth you can mind.—There's the dinner bell.'

'Poor Laurie!' said his mother as he slammed the door

behind him. 'But, Rhona, my child, tell me what you think we ought to do.'

• 'I think, mother,' and the light came back to Rhona's eyes, 'I think we ought to go home to England as fast as we can.' • • •

And a few days afterwards they were at Thun on their way home. Pretty Thun! with its blue-green river, and its view of the great snow-chain, and its steep picturesque town, scrambling, roof after roof, up to the church and château on the hill. The Somervilles had a corner room at the hotel, with balconies that looked two ways: one, on to the gay-coloured town, bright with green *persiennes*, and red roofs, and brown bridges, and yellow or pink walls, all reflected in the peacock-blue water of the stream—a gaudy picture; the other, on to the solemn white range beyond the lake.

Laurence and Rhona were standing on the balcony before sunset. In the room behind, where their mother was resting on an angular red velvet sofa, the light was beginning to fail. A hurried waiter rushed in with a flaring lamp, which looked ghastly in the rose and orange flush of the evening. Laurence leant over the balcony looking towards the Alps. He had been very silent and uncommunicative during the last few days. The dean's proposition had somehow put him out. He and his sister were not in sympathy. He would not talk to her on this his last evening; he only nodded his head when she spoke to him, and smoked perseveringly. Rhona stood beside him with downcast eyes and rather a sad face. As far as she was concerned, the ardent hope and purpose that had come with the reading of the dean's letter grew stronger every day. Her life should be given ungrudgingly to the furtherance of his great project. It was something worth living for; but she could not help being chilled by her mother's doubts, and by Laurence's silent antagonism.

To-morrow he was going back to Oxford as fast as trains and boats could take him; so this was his last evening among his well-beloved snow-mountains. They could not

have vouchsafed to him a parting vision of more solemn loveliness ; for, as Rhona lifted up her eyes, she beheld the whole chain of the Alps transfigured before them, lighted up, as it were, as if by some unearthly fire that was kindled within their mighty hearts. Peak after peak, standing out against a clear, green sky, caught the glow of rose-coloured flame, as the hidden pageant of sunset passed down the western sky. The glory deepened, paused, lingered, as if unwilling to depart. The transparent red grew more and more intense. Rhona held her breath. It was a silent dream of glory, a revelation of Heaven's own radiance.

But presently, slowly, one fire-crowned summit begins to pale—another—yet another. Each fades to a softer glow of pink, then lilac ; now they are dying into gray ; now all are white once more with cold snow-whiteness ; and the desolate dim range has the effect of receding slowly into the distance, as the purple shadows darken on the black mass of the Niesen in the foreground, and the last golden cloud floats up from where the sun has gone down behind.

And all the time Laurence Somerville went on smoking phlegmatically through shine and shadow, with his arms crossed on the iron railing of the balcony, and his chin propped on his clasped hands.

'Awfully jolly,' he vouchsafed to observe at last, getting up with a stretch and a yawn, and casting a parting glance at the dim Mönch and shadowy Eiger. 'I say, isn't it nearly time for the table-d'hôte?'

Poor Rhona went down to the great lighted *salle à manger* in a very subdued state of mind. The glory seemed to have faded from her dreams like the pink flush from the snow. No one shared them. As for Laurence, he was indifferent to everything, she said to herself ; he cared neither for his father's memory nor for this marvellous sunset vision of the mountains he professed to be so fond of. The sight of their glory had failed to move him the least bit. But an hour or two later, Rhona was oddly undeceived.

She was sitting beside her mother on the covered terrace outside the hotel. The pretty garden beneath, full of

cannas and big foliage plants, had caught a fanciful half-tropical beauty from the shimmer of the moon. Broad silvery leaves hung motionless in the night air. At one end of the terrace a band was playing a cheerful *pot-pourri* of national airs; the 'Ranz des Vaches' melting into 'Rule Britannia,' and the 'Marseillaise' into the 'Russian Hymn.'

Laurence was walking up and down the gravel walk with a young American lady, whose acquaintance he had made at Mürren, a pretty picturesque girl, with her hair cut in a fringe over her forehead, and a wonderful head-gear, half Rembrandt hat, half coal-scuttle bonnet.

Rhona, drinking her coffee on the terrace, overheard scraps of their conversation as they passed below.

'Did you see the sunset this evening?' he asked. 'I hoped you would. I wanted to find you to tell you to look at it; but I missed you, somehow, after the steamboat came in.'

'Of course we saw it, we were in a boat on the lake—a large party.'

'I wish we had seen it together,' in a lowered tone.

'Yes? It was quite the finest sunset I have seen in Europe.'

'It was fine, and no mistake. Those grand old mountains lighting themselves up, and then getting white and cold again. It gave one an odd feeling. I don't know why, I'm not romantic, but it made one think somehow, and brought back old days into one's mind.'

'We saw Heidelberg Castle lighted up with red Bengal lights one evening,' said the girl. 'The sunset this evening quite put me in mind of that. Did you stay at Heidelberg coming out? We had the loveliest time there.'

'Red Bengal lights,' thought Rhona, 'compared with the unearthly splendour of this sunset; and Laurence did not seem to care a bit or to feel any incongruity!'

They passed out of her hearing. And she had thought that her brother took no heed! It was just as if he pretended indifference on purpose to—— But here they were coming back. Laurence was talking in the same low

earnest voice, and she was fluttering her fan and looking up towards the lights and the people in the verandah. As they passed, Rhona heard him say, 'That was just before my poor father's death.' He was speaking to a stranger of their father—Laurence! he who never willingly mentioned his name to the daughter who had worshipped him. He was telling this chance acquaintance about the dear past—of the memories that the sunset had awakened, while his own sister could not wring a word or a glance from him. And the listener he had chosen could only respond by recollections of the Bengal lights at Heidelberg.

It was a new experience to Rhona, and it puzzled her. How grateful she would have been to him for one word about their father! What full sympathy she would have been able to give him! But he would not have it from her; he must needs force his confidence on a stranger.

Well, it must always be with a strange sensation that you discover how the music you fancy yourself best able to evoke will not be called forth by your touch, but is prompt to yield its deepest tones under some careless alien hand.

'Good-bye, Rhona,' Laurence said, taking leave of her in the gray dawn of a shivery morning, the mist and rain of which blotted Alps, and lake, and garden, into one broad smudge, like a spoilt drawing. 'Good-bye, old thing! Bring mother home safe! And, mind, I am not going to stand her being worried by the dean or any one else.'

'No, Laurie,' she responded meekly, being still under the shadow of the Rembrandt hat and the moonlit garden.

CHAPTER II

‘In fair London town.’

‘Now, my dear Mrs. Somerville, the less time we lose in setting to work the better.’

Thus did the Dean of Morechester open the deliberations of the Council of Four, which assembled one foggy October evening, in the sombre, comfortable, fire-lighted library of Sir Graham Somerville’s house in Piccadilly. The master of the house was spending the winter at his villa near Bayonne, and his sister-in-law and her daughter had it all to themselves.

Only that evening they had arrived in London.

As the train came clanking into the Charing Cross Station from the fog outside, two well-known figures started, as it were, out of the past, and stood beneath the gaslights among the waiting crowd.

The dean, shovel hat, black gaiters, gold spectacles and all, was quick to signal welcome with his umbrella, and to run nimbly along the platform with the shouting porters beside their carriage door.

Farther on, waiting composedly just opposite the stopping place, stood a black, narrow, upright figure, a head and shoulders taller than the people around him.

‘Mother, there is John Mowbray,’ Rhona said.

For a great many years John Mowbray had been not only her father’s senior curate, but also his dearest friend and trusty counsellor.

‘The less time we lose in setting to work the better!’

So spake the dean. Mrs. Somerville sat upright in her chair and looked appealingly first at him and then across the table at John Mowbray. Not that she was likely to

obtain much encouragement from him. She was instinctively aware of that. No one had been more closely associated than John Mowbray with Doctor Somerville's life and work. Few knew him better, or after a stern, silent, undemonstrative fashion worshipped his memory with a more loyal devotion. He and the Dean of Morechester rarely viewed matters in the same light; but in this they cordially agreed, that less as a tribute to their friend's personal fame, than because it would be of service to the world, his life ought to be published.

Therefore it was not much more easy for Mrs. Somerville to confide her doubts and fears to John Mowbray, than to discuss them with Rhona herself—Rhona with her great shining eyes and her fearless, ardent smile. Poor Mrs. Somerville! There sat Rhona bending eagerly forward; there was the dean smiling blandly, secure of her proud readiness to do as she was told; and there stood John Mowbray, towering over them with his back to the fire, keen and grave of face, brief and incisive of speech, serene in his self-confidence, and gifted but sparingly with either sympathy or perception.

Surely men blessed with deeper insight into character than John Mowbray, nay, for the matter of that, than the worthy dean himself, would have paused before forcing such a task on a gentle, yielding, rather weary woman. But John was not good at seeing difficulties. In his own life, he had a habit of ignoring them—those of other people he failed systematically to discover. So to-night he never found out how Mrs. Somerville's lip was quivering, or how her thin white hands trembled as she clasped and unclasped them nervously.

He did not speak; he only bent his head in assent when the dean announced that there was no time to be lost, yet Mrs. Somerville knew instinctively that there was no help in him.

That silent nod seemed to urge her hopelessly forward. There was no appeal from it. Rhona nodded back, with a little friendly gesture of approbation. Her mother—well, after all, she felt happier with the dean.

Good kind soul! he sat down by her cosily, put on his gold spectacles, prosed, glanced over one or two of his own notes, and talked of a sympathetic insight.

Mrs. Somerville took heart of grace after John had bidden them good-night, and had betaken himself to a clergy-house at the East End, where he now ruled supreme over a band of hard-worked young curates. She looked deprecatingly in the dean's face.

'I am afraid you are making a mistake,' said she.

'Humph!' said he.

'No, but really, dear dean, I am afraid you are greatly overrating my powers—I am sure you are. To write a good biography must require real genius.'

He patted her hand with a benevolent smile. 'Genius, my dear lady, is a will-o'-the-wisp, a delusive and most dangerous guide. I mistrust genius. Nay, I object to it. No, no, believe me, what we need here is no flash of erratic genius, but just the sobriety of experience, and a sympathetic insight.'

'If somebody who could do it better would only undertake it,' she pleaded. 'If John Mowbray, for instance, could have spared the time——'

She stopped short. The dean's hands were lifted up in horror.

'John Mowbray,' he murmured, closing his eyes. 'John Mowbray! Why, my dear friend,' opening them again, 'John Mowbray is an enthusiast, and a young enthusiast to boot. Need I say more? Only this. Permit me most emphatically to enter my protest against our rushing into any such fatal error of judgment as you are contemplating.'

Rhona, sitting by silently, felt that the danger of her mother, guided by the dean, 'rushing' into any line of conduct, was small in the extreme.

'I merely threw it out as a suggestion,' said Mrs. Somerville meekly.

But the dean could not immediately recover himself. He continued to shake his head, and to murmur something about fatal impetuosity.

There was a pause. Mrs. Somerville drew a troubled

sigh, Rhona an impatient one. The dean put his spectacles into their case with careful tidiness. At last he spoke again, solemnly :

‘Had it been in my own power, and in accordance with duties previously undertaken, I should have asked no dearer privilege than myself——’

‘Mother,’ broke involuntarily from Rhona’s lips ; an alarmed, breathless, wholly audible ‘mother.’

Even Mrs. Somerville started, and the colour came in a rush over her pale face. She looked apprehensively at Rhona, only to meet a quick shake of the head and a vehement frown of warning.

For Rhona could scarcely restrain herself. But she knew full well that it was under protest that her youth and inexperience were admitted at the conference at all. So that it was no good speaking, she could only frown, and look her indignation.

‘That it should have come to this ! The life of her great father—of Jasper Somerville—written by the Dean of Morechester of all people in the world, with the sobriety of experience,’ said Rhona to herself in mocking bitterness, ‘and a sympathetic insight ! The Dean of Morechester, indeed ! Will mother never speak ?’

She spoke at last, in a hesitating voice, laying her hand on the dean’s coat-sleeve : ‘Dear dean, indeed you must not think of such a thing.’

‘My dearest madam,’ and he took the hand kindly in his own, ‘I have thought of it. I have repeatedly given the subject my most serious consideration.’

Mrs. Somerville unconsciously withdrew her hand. Rhona was first red, then white. With the fatal impetuosity and quick despair of youth, she had already given up hope. Her mother would yield. In her mind’s eye she beheld the two ponderous volumes wherein were contained her father’s life according to the Dean of Morechester—she saw and shivered.

‘But——’ (What relief a simple ‘but’ may bring !) Rhona scarcely dared yet to breathe. Still, the dean had said ‘but.’ ‘But you may not be aware that the hope of my

whole later life, the scheme for the restoration of Morechester Cathedral, is now fast approaching maturity. I may venture, in all humility, to say that I have been throughout its moving spring. And now the gigantic (I apprehend I am entitled to use the word "gigantic" without incurring the charge of exaggeration) the gigantic labour of superintending its execution devolves in great measure on me.' He paused, much affected, then added in a husky whisper, 'I do not dare to withdraw my hand from the plough.'

'No, indeed, no!'

That was how it came about that Mrs. Somerville accepted her fate without more remonstrance. Between sympathy and relief she had pledged herself almost without knowing it.

'I must just do the best I can, and Rhona will be always at hand to help me.'

Rhona smiled without speaking. What need could there be of words? Had she not from that evening at Rosenlaui vowed herself to the work? Would not the humblest service be enough for her?

Yes, there was no need to protest, her help was ready enough—they might be sure enough of that.

But the dean was speaking again, his emotion instantly dispelled by a fresh misgiving.

'What can he have to say now?' thought Rhona, impatiently. This—

'The zeal of my dear young friend Rhona for her father's memory is most pleasing, and in no wise surprises me; but it must not, at the same time, blind us to her youthful impetuosity and immaturity of judgment.'

'Ah,' a faint red flickering colour rose in Mrs. Somerville's cheek, and she spoke quickly, 'her father would not say that; you don't know how much he thought of her judgment.'

Rhona rose quietly and left the room. She went into the great, dark dining-room, where the glimmer of a low fire showed her glimpses of muffled family portraits, and rows of massive crimson leather chairs. The girl lifted one of the blinds and looked out into Piccadilly. It was raining. The

reflection from the street-lamps shone on the wet pavement. Each light had a blurred halo round it, and the shadows of the passers-by were flung fantastically backwards and forwards as they passed under each lamp-post. Why did her mother speak so bitterly? The dean's ear might be too dull to catch the tone of constraint; not so Rhona's. 'You do not know how much her father thought of her.' She repeated the words to herself, and sighed. Then she thought of Magdalen, her beautiful sister who was dead.

Six years ago Magdalen had been the good angel of the house, her mother's idol, and Rhona and Laurence were only a couple of merry tomboys, galloping about on their ponies, and rarely out of mischief. Magdalen's illness threw the first warning shadow that heralded a change in their sunny young lives. For the last two winters of her life her mother took her to Italy, and Rhona was left behind with her father, who could not leave his work.

She never forgot the evening of the day on which her mother and sister went away for the first time. Laurence was at school, and Rhona felt very lonely. In the twilight she strayed out into the desolate patch of begrimed shrubbery, that called itself the rectory garden, and wandered aimlessly up and down between the gooseberry bushes, now and then stopping to try and shake down a few pears that hung on the top branches of a venerable tree. It was all very dull and dreary. There was a light shining from the windows of her father's library, but the familiar drawing-room was dark, and the house looked desolate. The library was unexplored territory as yet to Rhona, nor did the little romp know very much about her hard-worked father.

She shook her head, and her little white teeth bit into a brown pear with melancholy energy.

Suddenly she heard her father's voice calling her. 'Rhona, where are you? Come here, child, I want you to help me!'

She flung her big pear recklessly over the wall and rushed into the house; and as she crossed the threshold of the library a new life began for her. Some people—old friends of the family—said regretfully that, owing to her mother's

absence, Rhona's education was never finished. It might be so. She grew older very quickly, however; and when Laurence came home for the Christmas holidays he hardly knew her. He went grumbling to his father—Rhona was always in the study, he never got her now, and his holidays were being ruined! Doctor Somerville laughed at them both, and took them for a long gallop across country.

'Little Rhona,' Magdalen said one day in the following spring, 'how old you seem!' and the elder sister looked at her half proudly and half wistfully. 'You are much older and wiser than I am nowadays.'

Rhona, her little face puckered into one frown of concentrated thought, was poring over a crabbed manuscript, which she had brought from her father's room. She flung down her pen and jumped up, colouring crimson. 'Oh, Maidie,' she said, coming to kneel beside her sister's sofa, 'I hope you don't mind. I did not mean to be old, but I tried very much indeed to grow up because father was all alone.'

'Yes, I know he was alone,' Magdalen sighed, and for a few minutes did not speak again. Then she looked up, smiling. 'I am very glad you can help father; but, Rhona,' she pulled her little sister down close to her, and added, in a hurried whisper, 'be very good to mother too, by and by.'

Rhona opened her eyes and wondered what Magdalen could mean, but she did not forget. More especially she remembered when a year afterwards Dr. Somerville went out to Mentone by himself, and after a time he and Mrs. Somerville came home without beautiful Magdalen. Her mother was crushed and silent, almost dazed with sorrow, and Rhona stood aside, very sorrowful too, and sorely puzzled how to 'be good to mother' as Magdalen had bidden her. She asked her father at last, but he only smiled gravely and stroked her head; and Rhona watched silently, unconsciously learning much of the strong patient tenderness with which he comforted and tended his wife, shielding her from the wear and tear of his toiling life, and taking all its burdens on his own shoulders.

A few months only, and the greater blow fell. Then,

indeed, Rhona thought of Magdalen's words, for there was no one left, full of wisdom and of the strength of love, to be 'very good to mother.' So the mother, whose best-loved child had been taken from her, and the poor little daughter, who had lost in her father the very idol of her heart, were left together.

Rhona tried hard to be a good and dutiful child; but—there was no denying it—she and her mother seldom cared for the same things. Here she was, for instance, brimming over with interest and energy, ready to delight in the stray fragment of life in London that had come in her way, while it was simple purgatory to Mrs. Somerville, who loved unbroken quiet, and fresh air, and sunshine.

Certainly there was not much sunshine to be found in Piccadilly that rainy October. Sir Graham Somerville's great noisy 'family mansion' could not be called a cheerful spot. On the contrary, it was sepulchral, and had all the melancholy suggestiveness that belongs to an empty house. The vast black-and-white paved hall, with its enormous fireplace and its cavernous porter's chair, opened on to a double stone staircase full of echoes, and the dining-room was all green baize and brown holland.

The library behind looked out into a brick court, with high walls painted drab-colour, and more smuts than sunbeams struggled in through its lofty windows. All the same, it was very comfortable—exceedingly comfortable—after a solid, sombre, stifling fashion of its own. There was always a subdued glow of firelight, if not of daylight, in the room, and, averred Rhona, the huge leathern arm-chairs were homes of luxury, while the smoke-dried books, guarded by brass trelliswork, conveyed a suggestion of scholastic calm.

So Rhona stirred the fire into a blaze, and sat reading contentedly on the hearth-rug, while her poor mother, in a mistaken pursuit after fresh air, was clambering on to the library table to open the window at the top. And the great stream of traffic went on remorselessly, surging along Piccadilly, its noise and clamour contrasting quaintly with the stillness inside the house. Rhona, as often as she crossed the hall, had visions of a spectral hall-porter sitting

in his hooded chair, grimly waiting for the double knocks that never thundered on the door. Only instead, every afternoon, there sounded the modest ring that heralded the dean's advent, and that no hall-porter's ghost that respected itself would have dreamed of noticing.

Nevertheless, its first tinkle was wont to send Rhona flying up the staircase, to take refuge in the long range of deserted reception-rooms overhead. True, they had been packed up and dismantled ever since the wedding of a certain Evelina Somerville, who used to give routs and masquerades in them, some time about the beginning of the century. They were dim, lofty, shadowy-looking rooms. The grand old furniture stood huddled in the middle of each floor, covered with great sheets, the irregular outlines of which, seen in the half-light, suggested fantastic groups of shrouded figures, the spellbound dancers of some phantom minuet. Rhona had a liking for this region of dusty buhl cabinets and unwound Louis Quatorze clocks, where it would have been high treason to pull up one of the yellow blinds, so that the long drawn-out vista of rooms went glimmering and fading away, through one carved and gilded doorway after another, into dusty gloom. In the half-darkness of the foggy afternoons, Rhona's pretty young figure, pacing up and down over the bare boards, would be caught by many a tarnished mirror and reflected from one to the other, till she had shadowy glimpses of herself multiplied over and over again, and moving at different angles, as if a dozen Rhonas were dancing a quadrille.

It was idle pastime enough. The dean would have been shocked at such wasted afternoons—to be dancing quadrilles with one's shadow at four o'clock in the day.

Poor dean! Rhona could scarcely have explained to him how exhilarating she found the atmosphere of the empty rooms, in comparison with that of the library, when once he and his notebook were fairly in possession of the writing-table, by her mother's side.

And Rhona, wandering about the faded ballrooms, was only waiting. She was vividly conscious all the time of the stir and hum of London just outside her door. The drowsy

silence within only heightened, by its contrast, the roar of the great city; and the day would come when for her too the doors would be thrown open, and she would step over the quiet threshold of her youth into the thronged highway of life.

Meanwhile John Mowbray often came in the evening, and was, at present, the hero of the situation.

The dean, to do him justice, had been indefatigable. Perfectly marvellous were the letters he wrote, the answers he received, the expeditions he undertook, the conversations he held, the encouragement he met with. He had worked wonders—voluminous indeed were the notes that filled his book, the materials that grew under his hands, the treasure of things, new and old, that he poured out, with proud humility, at Mrs. Somerville's feet.

'I am gratified—yes, I own that I am gratified by the result of my poor efforts. I have endeavoured to do my part, my modest part. The rest, my dear madam, I leave in better hands; it remains for you to clothe the dry bones with life.'

Dry? Yes, very dry bones indeed were some of those he collected together. Mrs. Somerville was overwhelmed with gratitude and despair. She turned over the rapidly increasing mass of papers he was accumulating with respectful bewilderment. What was she to make of it all—how bring order out of this chaos?

It was here that John Mowbray came in with admirable effect. He possessed the power of making the dry bones live, and from the disjointed fragments could call up a living, breathing figure.

Rhona took good care to have done with Evelina Somerville and her dreary old ballrooms long before the time when, perhaps between an evening service and a night-school, John Mowbray's long quick stride was to be heard across the hall.

In he came, with his brief and composed greeting, and as he drew his chair up to the table the precious packet was laid open before him.

His manner never showed any token of haste or pre-

occupation. Its studied self-control and elaborate quietness had been wont to provoke Rhona in old days.

But she had forgotten all that now. Her eyes were fastened on him, as he sat with the stream of lamplight falling on his keen olive face, one long, sinewy, characteristic hand shading his eyes, while the other one rapidly threw aside sheet after sheet of the dean's manuscripts.

And when presently he looked up and began to talk, Mrs. Somerville sat erect in a high chair, pencil in hand, feverishly taking notes, lest a word should be forgotten. For he was gifted with a power of graphic description that was very remarkable. By a few strong pictorial touches, he could call up, as if by magic, a visible presence. Rhona felt as if she saw her father, as if she could hear his voice, and understand his thoughts. The young man threw a glow of fresh light on the story of the life-work, a great portion of which he had watched and shared with his whole heart. He made the mother and daughter glory more and more in the grand character he unfolded. Never had they felt so closely drawn together as when they sat holding each other's hands and listening breathlessly. Sometimes they cried, sometimes they laughed; the word-painting was so vivid, the picture so beautiful and true. There were records of his rare eloquence, his zeal, his unbounded influence, that made their hearts beat proudly. Stories, too, of his gentleness—his generosity—little odd, precious scraps of individuality and of characteristic sayings. It was curious. John Mowbray himself entirely disappeared behind the portrait he was painting. If they had not been too much absorbed to think of him at all, they would have said, 'How unlike John Mowbray!'

But what a book could have been written, if only his words had been taken down red-hot, and forthwith printed and published!

Rhona felt as if she was being brought back to common life with a rough shock when, one evening, he pushed aside the last paper, looked at his watch, rose, and, after standing in thoughtful silence by the fire for a minute or two, asked Mrs. Somerville in his dry, every-day tone, whether she had heard lately from Wildenhall.

Wildenhall! why need he be for ever talking about Wildenhall? She hated the very name: a lonely, dreary, dead-alive village in the midst of the fens and heath-lands of the Eastern Counties. As if her mother did not think enough about Wildenhall without John Mowbray to remind her of it!

It was natural enough that they should talk of it together, for both were Wildenhall folk after a fashion, and it was while staying at Wildenhall that Dr. Somerville first discovered his trusty and well-beloved John, then beginning work as the youthful curate of his uncle the rector. He was extremely young in those days, certainly, and so overflowing with merciless energy and inexperienced zeal that, as Dr. Somerville soon found out, he was half killing the gentle, easy-going country parson, who clung to the fashions and traditions of his youth. Old Archdeacon Mowbray lived in terror of his nephew and his high-handed proceedings, nor could he be grateful enough to the benevolent friend who carried off the young Churchman to his Northern parish, and plunged him up to the neck in work among the factory hands, where he soon grew gaunt, and sallow, and contented.

Mrs. Somerville's brother lived at Wildenhall Grange, just outside the village, while the Abbey, with its great park and the land surrounding it for many miles, belonged to John Mowbray's elder brother.

Distance now lent enchantment to the memory of the place where he had once felt so stifled and repressed. As for Mrs. Somerville, Rhona knew only too well that her heart was at Wildenhall.

Did not Uncle Dick write to her once a week, drawing entrancing pictures of country freshness and calm, and imploring her to come and keep house for him in his bachelor estate? And did not the fogs grow blacker out of pure perversity, as November drew on, and a longer string of omnibuses, cabs, vans, and market carts go clattering each day down Piccadilly, on purpose to spite Rhona?

To a person who constitutionally hated noise, Piccadilly might perhaps be a little trying. Rhona liked it, but her

mother learnt with unwilling accuracy to distinguish the rattle of a hansom cab from the jolt of a four-wheeler, and even the grinding clatter of a luggage van from the rumble of an omnibus, and the self-satisfied light roll of a private carriage.

In vain she retreated into the stuffy library at the back of the house, spread out the dean's papers dutifully, and composed her mind to study them—the postman was sure to arrive with his angry-sounding double-knock, or the door-bell to peal with a sudden jar through the empty hall.

At last the dean went back to Morechester, leaving behind him, as he justly observed, plenty of grist for the mill. And after that Rhona, who had been fighting a sort of dumb battle against Wildenhall, was fain to confess that the day was going against her.

One day as she came into the library after an exhilarating walk in the fog, her mother put an open letter into her hand. It contained one of Uncle Dick's most eloquent appeals. Never had there been a more glorious autumn known; such brilliant tints—such fine sunsets. Rhona looked round wistfully. The candles were burning on the table—the fire smouldered—two squares of drab-coloured opaqueness showed the whereabouts of the windows.

'Do you really think this so delightful, you poor child?' her mother's voice sounded appealingly out of the gloom.

Well, a few minutes ago it had been as black as midnight, and the gas was lighted all along Piccadilly. Now every thing was turning copper-coloured, and here was the sun looking like a mouldy orange, striving to pierce the fog.

'Wildenhall Grange, down in the fen country, and Uncle Dick, who, though one of the kindest and best people in the world, was——'

Rhona was glad to remember afterwards that she did not finish the sentence, even to herself, but said 'dear Uncle Dick' instead.

'You used to like the country, Rhona.'

Rhona thought of sluggish canals crawling through flat fenlands, of pollard willows, and black barges; then suddenly of Magdalen's words, 'Be very good to mother.'

'You know I simply abominate going off to Wildenhall,' she said to John Mowbray a day or two before they left London.

He looked at her with some surprise.

'What does it matter where you go,' he said, austere, 'provided you are doing your appointed work?'

'What, indeed?' she rejoined, with a half-laugh. 'But all the same, there was a time when you did not find the delights of Wildenhall so all-sufficing yourself.'

He was not listening. 'You will see Wildenhall,' he presently observed.

'Well, it seems possible.'

'What would I have given a couple of years ago,' he went on after another pause, 'to hear that your father was going to Wildenhall, and that he would be living near my brother Adrian!'

'But I thought your brother very seldom went there.'

He sat down, and stared absently at the fire.

'Your father used to take an interest in Adrian.'

'Yes.'

Rhona sat down thoughtfully in the opposite arm-chair, her cheek resting on her hand. He had brought a whole train of memories round her. Her father had indeed taken a keen interest in the brilliant young author and orator, who was also his curate's brother.

The dear father! Rhona could see him now, pushing away his own writing, and rising to pace up and down the room, with his face full of distress and indignation, and of eagerness; she could see him stopping to read a passage out of some new article written by Adrian Mowbray, and afterwards ruffling up his hair and knitting his brow with vexation because the author was not at hand to argue out with him some point contained in it. His whole soul was roused to meet a foeman whom he felt to be worthy of his steel. For they were foemen; and yet his heart warmed to the younger writer, with his assumptions and his scepticism, and his polished and scholarly style. He did not mind the arrogance and the cynicism—that was not the point. Of course it was unbecoming for a man of that age

to lay down the law ; but through all the triumphant self-assertion there might be caught, at least so Jasper Somerville thought, the faint echo of a sigh. And the old divine, who had fought, and long ago won his fight of faith, was ready to overlook the arrogance, in his sympathy with the sigh.

‘Poor fellow !—poor dear fellow ! don’t judge him without knowing,’ he said once. ‘I say, John, couldn’t one get him here ?’

John Mowbray, standing by the window, paper-cutter in hand, the last number of one of the reviews crossed over his arm, looked stern and melancholy. He could not find excuses for his brother, nor could he understand his rector’s sympathy with thought which he did not share. Sometimes, indeed, it dawned on him mistily that the secret of the wide influence he wondered at might lie in that very sympathy ; but he had no pity himself for ‘so-called honest doubt,’ and the tolerance of the greater, broader nature remained a mystery to him.

He took the review into his hands again, cut open with severity one or two of the leaves, and turned over the pages with a frown.

‘It isn’t only the matter that I find fault with, but the manner. See here ; the dogmatism, the positive assertion of a fallacy, the readiness——’

‘To teach his grandmother,’ the rector interrupted with a smile. His curate often made him smile. ‘Well, John, perhaps the less some of us say about dogmatism the better.’

John did not resent the hint, neither did he relax into a smile.

‘I wish you could meet my brother,’ he said, still frowning.

‘Yes, so do I. Couldn’t one get hold of him by fair means or foul ?’—with almost boyish eagerness.

Long before the innocent little plot then laid could be carried out, the rector’s kindly, eager heart had ceased to beat. Afterwards John Mowbray rigidly denied himself one speculation as to what might have happened had it

been otherwise ordered. If Adrian had once seen the rector they must surely have become friends. But that was not to be: he and Adrian Mowbray never saw each other.

All this came back to Rhona's recollection, as Adrian's brother sat gazing absently into the fire.

She further remembered that one night, moved thereto by his rector's irresistible interest, he suddenly departed from his accustomed reticence and related to them a chapter of family history which regarded Adrian. It was a snowy winter's evening, and the story was a melancholy one, somewhat wild and queer. It made an impression on Rhona, chiefly, at first, because of its connection with John Mowbray, who was so reserved a man, and so uncommunicative about his own affairs, that this was the first time she had really credited him with the possession of kith and kin, or associated him with a locality and a name. She wondered now that she had so nearly forgotten the story, until John's look and manner recalled it to her vividly to-night.

'Well,' he said, presently, getting up and shaking off his abstracted air, 'I am glad you are going to Wildenhall. I want you to promise me, Rhona, that you will go the first thing to the church, and look at our cousin Olga's tomb in the Mowbray Chapel. Afterwards you can see the Abbey and Hithersea Mere; and then I think you will understand better the story I once told you and your father about my brother Adrian's young days.'

'I promise to go and see the church directly I arrive,' said Rhona, 'and to look for the Mowbray Chapel.'

John said 'Thank you,' and departed.

CHAPTER III

‘Them look for freits, my master dear,
Then freits shall follow him.’

It was a grand old church, far too large and too magnificent for the scattered hamlet of Wildenhall. Its pierced spire rose tapering towards the clouds, a landmark in the flat fen country for miles around.

The Mowbray Chapel in the north transept was rich in monuments and in sculptured armorial bearings. There were knightly helmets, the shields of crusaders, dusty banners, dim escutcheons, brasses, and mural tablets. A patched memorial-window, painted in faint colours, let in the cold north light: underneath it rose a canopied tomb elaborately carved and gilt, whereon knelt the prim, quaint effigies of a knight in full armour, and of his lady, their clasped hands raised stiffly towards each other. Behind them were ranged their children, a goodly row of olive branches—the sons in carefully graduated sizes kneeling behind the knight, and behind the dame a still longer line of maidens in ruffs and odd little round caps.

Olga Mowbray’s tomb stood apart, white, distinct, and modern. On it lay a girl’s sleeping figure most exquisitely carved in marble, the greatest charm of which lay probably in the impression it conveyed of dreamless and unbroken rest. From the flexible lines of the young, slight form, shrouded in folds of simple drapery, to the delicate moulding of the peaceful little face, with its drooped eyelids and its soft half-smile, every curve and touch told the same story—that of profound repose.

Visitors were rare to the beautiful far-away church. Those

who chanced to come, however, usually, like Rhona Somerville, lingered for many minutes beside that one monument. She, as others had done before her, felt herself being lulled into a sort of trance, the calmness of the pose, the innocent and childish beauty, the attitude of the tender little hand out of which drooped a cluster of snowdrops, stealing over the senses like the closing words of some beautiful poem.

Obedient to the promise she had made John Mowbray, Rhona's first visit after her arrival at Wildenhall was to the church, and afterwards she went, as he had bidden her, across the park to look at his brother's closed and silent house.

The story she had been told, which joined together the names of Olga and Adrian Mowbray, gave its chief interest to the scene. Wildenhall was strange and new to her, and its associations as yet purely of the past.

It was not a beautiful place—scarcely even picturesque, on that wan November afternoon; but, such as it was, it had the power of appealing to the imagination as many lovely places fail to do. A huge, straight house was Wildenhall Abbey, built of a pale stone, that the gray and yellow lichen had thickly coated, and it stood in the middle of a tract of park land, redeemed centuries ago from the fen and forest. Trees bent in patches over secluded and reed-bordered pools. The grass was rough and coarse, and rushes were mingled with it; ditches and dykes crossed each other in every direction. On the south side the park was bounded by Hithersea Mere, a broad and winding lake, one bend of which came shining up close to the terraced garden. In that queer garden no flower-beds or gay borders were to be found at any season of the year; instead, there were four great fish-ponds, stone-edged, and set in grass and gravel, square-cut lawns, yew hedges closely clipped, and broad, straight, gravel walks.

There was water everywhere—fountains, canals, the moat round the house, the wide mere, glassy and cold, stretching away towards the horizon.

All was curiously colourless and shadowless. On the other side of the house, heavily-wrought iron gates opened on to a paved court, with a stone horse-pond on one side,

a massive fountain in the middle, and the walled moat with its bridge. An archway led into the pleasaunce, as they were pleased to call that stately region of fish-ponds and clipped yews.

Wildenhall Abbey, though a comparatively modern house, claimed its ecclesiastical title of right, for within a stone's throw of the terrace, half-hidden by a group of black cypresses, and close to the water's edge, rose the ivy-covered fragment of a ruined chapel and cloister. The other monastic buildings had long since disappeared. The unroofed walls of the chancel were alone standing, and at one end an exquisitely moulded east window, tapestried by brambles, let the rising sun flame through its broken tracery. That was all. The bit of delicately-carved cloister ended in a mass of fallen stonework, beyond which the base of a twisted column showed here and there through the turf. Tradition said that the great bell of the Abbey lay buried under the waters of the mere. The fish-ponds of the East Anglian monks had outlived their lofty belfry, and their halls and cells were grass-grown.

The master of Wildenhall lived very little at the Abbey, except when in the months of September and December he came down for shooting. He was a good shot, and a fairly keen sportsman for a few weeks at a time; but his vocation was not that of a country gentleman. Long before the faintest prospect had arisen of his being transformed into a landed proprietor, he had marked out his career, and planned to carve his own way to fortune by his pen and by his tongue. For he was the son of a younger son, nor had his father ever been a favourite with his parents. Yet Adrian Mowbray was still quite a young man when, by a most unexpected turn of the wheel of fate, the family estates passed into his hands.

His tenants liked him, and found him a just and liberal landlord, but they shook their heads a little over him. It did not interest them very much to read about his brilliant speeches in the House of Commons, or to be told that he was one of the rising stars in the political horizon. They even grudged him his success as an author.

Mr. Heathcote, of the Grange, was not the only one of his neighbours who thought it a pity the grass should grow in the paved court of the Abbey, and the place get more and more the look of a haunted house, while the squire shut himself up in his chambers in London and wrote articles against superstition. 'And what's more, not a soul reads the articles when they are written,' added Dick Heathcote cheerily.

He was mistaken. John Mowbray read his brother's articles (with regret), and so did Dr. Somerville.

'It may be,' John observed to the latter, 'that the circumstances of his early life gave him a special recoil against anything that he imagines to savour of superstition.'

'And that he confounds faith with superstition. It is just conceivable——'

'Did you ever hear,' John went on abruptly, 'of Olga Mowbray?'

That was how Rhona first heard her name and her story.

It seemed to become a very real one when she stood on the terrace steps of what had been Olga's home. After her first visit, Rhona often wandered about the Abbey gardens late in the afternoon. The place half attracted and half repelled her. Sometimes its unshuttered windows burnt in the sunlight like a house on fire. Sometimes they shone with a dull steel colour like an ice palace. The evening mist floated over the canal. Waterfowl rose with a clang and whirr of wings from the mere. The ruins grew shadowy and grim. The colourless garden looked like the haunt of Naiads, and Undines, and veiled white Maidens of the Mist.

Adrian Mowbray's grandfather, the old Squire of Wildenhall, outlived both his sons. Olga and her brother Ralph were the children of the elder and best beloved son, and Ralph was the heir. Their father had married a famous Swedish beauty whom he fell in love with while he was attached to the Embassy at Stockholm. She and her husband both died within a few months of one another, before their little Olga was three years old, or Ralph had passed beyond babyhood. The two orphans were brought

home to their grandfather's house by a Norwegian nurse, a handsome, stern, ignorant, peasant woman, so passionately devoted to her nurslings that it would have been cruel to part her from them. Unluckily for them, she was, according to John Mowbray, the most superstitious and prejudiced being that ever was seen, 'believing in omens, and fairies, and trolls, or whatever it is you call them—the whole pack of rubbish, in short, that the old-world Northern traditions are made up of.' Such as she was, she lived for many years at Wildenhall, and brought up Olga and her brother.

Until he began to distinguish himself, Adrian Mowbray had never even seen his grandfather. The old man had cared little for his second son, who went out into the world early, and made a career and home for himself. When, however, people took to speaking of Adrian as a rising barrister, and a young man very likely to make a figure in the world, the old people at Wildenhall were pleased, and asked him to pay them a visit. Perhaps there came over them some remorseful recollection of the dead son they had neglected; at all events, they grew excessively proud of their grandson, and could not have him often enough at Wildenhall. And there was Olga living always in the house.

She was wondrously fair, as became her Northern ancestry, and she was also curiously silent. When a gesture, a little bend of the head, a wave of the hand, or a smile, could be made to do duty for words, Olga always used them. Her silent grace, her brief, simple speech, and the noble pose of her little head recalled the fair-haired maidens in the Sagas she was so fond of poring over. People said both she and Ralph had a curiously dreamy expression in their eyes.

He was not a clever boy, but his manner was frank and pleasant, and his sister worshipped him—all the more, perhaps, because he leant on her and was led by her.

She was the elder by a year or two, and he was about seventeen when their cousin came to the Abbey, with all the prestige of his early success upon him—already a

marked man in his profession, a distinguished *littérateur*—such a grandson as the old Squire and Lady Gertrude could not fail to be proud of.

He was the first clever, cultivated man the girl had ever known. She, with her fair beauty, was most winning—at least he thought so. She was his first love.

He was made very welcome to his ancestral home. It was in autumn that he first came, and he and Olga and Ralph used to float about for hours on the great shining mere, bringing their boat home through the misty red sunsets, that lend to the deep water and the wild fenland a singular witchery that goes even beyond beauty.

One person only scowled on Adrian, and that was Ulrica, the Norwegian nurse. It had been his ill-luck early to make an enemy of her. He and Ralph had been shooting wild-duck one day on the island in the mere, and, on their return to the boat-house, they found Olga waiting to row home with them. Adrian thought she and her companions made a singularly effective picture—the keeper's boy was rowing, in his shirt-sleeves and leathern gaiters, and Olga sat at the bottom of the boat, leaning against old Ulrica, whose brown, stern, furrowed face and erect figure were thrown out against the dying daffodil of the sky behind her.

As the boat glided away homewards, after taking the two sportsmen on board, the girl still sat at her nurse's feet, looking up at her and listening with rapt attention to a wild, weird, gruesome legend of the fiords and forests, with which Ulrica had beguiled the time of waiting.

Adrian looked on, partly amused, partly vexed, for the tale grew more and more fantastically 'creepy,' and Olga's cheeks waxed paler and paler. Ralph was leaning forward open-mouthed to listen, and even the keeper's boy slackened his pace, and began to have uncomfortable qualms about his walk home past the ruins in the dark. Adrian burst out laughing at the three awestruck faces.

'Come, Ralph, you surely can't swallow all that,' he said, in a low tone of remonstrance; but Ulrica overheard him.

So did Olga. 'I believe in every word,' she said, with emphasis. The Norsewoman shot a sullen glance at him out of her pale blue eyes, and pressed her lips together, and from that day she hated him.

Adrian, however, was blissfully unconscious of his bad luck. The course of true love was running smooth for him. At first the Squire grumbled a good deal when his grandson asked to be allowed to marry his cousin Olga, who was the light of the old man's eyes. He had expected a grander lot in life for her, he said ; but Adrian had taken his fancy, Lady Gertrude wished him to consent, and Olga smiled and kissed him, clasping her little white hands together with a pretty gesture of supplication. So, after storming for a few days, he made up his mind to yield with a tolerably good grace, gave the young lovers his blessing, made a fresh will, and, dying not long afterwards, left Ralph to reign at Wildenhall.

The young heir wanted a year or two of being of age. He had a guardian, and Lady Gertrude Mowbray lived with her grandchildren. The guardian, Sir George Grantley, a faithful old family friend, frequently came to Wildenhall with his son, a young fellow of twenty. Ralph and he were sworn allies, and Keith Grantley, in a boyish, distant fashion, worshipped his friend's sister.

There was only one thing which rather disquieted Adrian Mowbray as time went on, and that was the gentle but unswerving persistence with which his betrothed clung to her belief, in the wild medley of superstitions and legendary myths, that her nurse had taught her to hold in reverence. He was powerless to laugh, or to reason her out of her faith in one of them. At first, though this rather provoked him, it charmed him too. He thought her silence and her mysticism made her so different from everybody else. She was like a person dwelling apart in some enchanted world of her own. She was not unreasonable—she expected no one to share her visionary habitation ; and, after all, he knew she loved him, and that of her realm of fancy and of faith she crowned him king.

Still, it was in him to be a somewhat masterful lover.

It did not please him that Ulrica should be able to sway her mind more than he could. There was an unspoken antagonism, always growing stronger, between him and the old woman. He tried his best to break the spell which she had woven round Olga in her childhood ; the web was too stout. By and by he ceased to have any patience with the omens, the portents, the fantastic rules by which she allowed her life to be guided, and he made up his mind to try whether he could not induce her to yield up some one of her superstitions at his bidding. In his own mind he made it a test of his power over her.

Christmas was near at hand, and the mere was frozen over. Both Ralph and Olga skated wonderfully well. Nothing brought colour and brightness into her fair face like the flying motion through the keen air. She never tired. She, and Ralph, and Adrian, and Keith Grantley were on the ice from morning till night. The spirits of the Northern maiden rose directly she came near the polished, purple surface, with its snow-shrouded banks. How intensely the whole winter picture pleased her—the leafless silhouettes of bordering alders and willows, the frozen reeds, the dark gray sky !

If she could have had her way she would have gone back on to the ice after dark, to skate by torchlight through the shadows and the moonlight gleams, away from the shivering trees along the shore, far out into the tract of frozen silence that lay in the centre of the mere. Adrian and Lady Gertrude could scarcely keep her back ; as for Ralph and Keith Grantley, they would have followed without question, whithersoever she led the way.

Therefore they were all surprised when she came down one morning and begged Ralph not to skate with the others, but to stay at home with her. It was a white ghost of a day, misty and pale, just the sort of day to be seen at its worst from the windows—moreover, the ice was perfect. No, Olga confessed that she was not thinking of the weather, she did not mind the fog, only she wanted Ralph to stay with her, and she was not going to skate herself.

Ralph demurred. They had a new sledge on the ice,

and yesterday she had been the most eager of them all to try it. Would she not let him push her in it? They would go like the wind. Olga shivered, but she still smiled as she said 'No,' and Ralph, easy, good-humoured, and a little weak, gave in to her as usual.

Not so Adrian.

'Olga, what is it?' he asked, briefly, as soon as he could get her alone. She stood silent, with downcast eyes, the rare red colour mantling her cheeks. 'Olga, what is it?' he repeated.

She hesitated.

'Why are we not to skate to-day?'

'Not you,' she said, quickly, 'only Ralph. I do not want to keep you and Keith at home—only Ralph.'

He was sitting at a table covered with books and papers, and he had turned half round to see her face as she stood behind him. When she proposed his going to skate without her he took up his pen with a quick gesture of vexation.

For a few minutes he wrote rapidly, and she stood near him, with a wistful and perplexed face. At last he felt a very light touch on his shoulder.

'Adrian.' He looked up with a relenting smile, but she could not smile back. 'Please don't want me to tell you why, for it would only vex you, I know that; but do leave Ralph at home to-day—because I ask you.'

Her lips quivered, and he felt her little hand trembling on his shoulder.

'What is it all about, Olga?' he asked, gently.

At last she told him, bending down and speaking in a whisper.

'It was a dream,' she said, 'a dreadfully vivid dream; it came to me before daylight, and morning dreams, Ulrica says——'

She checked herself in confusion.

'Well, what is it Ulrica says? the old hag,' he muttered between his teeth.

She did not answer.

'There will be another frost,' she presently said, exploringly; 'and then I will not say a word.'

‘Why then, less than now?’

‘My dream!’ she spoke in a hurried whisper. ‘I saw him—Ralph—three times, with the water streaming from his hair. They were carrying him up from there,’ pointing out of the window towards the mere. ‘He was dead—drowned; I saw his face all gray, and his blue lips.’

Adrian got up, clasping her cold hands tightly and drawing her close to him. He was intensely sorry for her, but none the less he felt that his time had come—the pitched battle between his influence and Ulrica’s must be fought now. How to strike the first blow, he really did not know; he only held her fast and said nothing.

The poor child clung to him in pleased surprise at the sympathy she had not expected.

‘I dreamt it three times—the fatal number,’ she repeated; ‘three times, Adrian.’

‘So much the worse for you, poor child! I am sure it was very horrid. Come here to the fire, Olga, and get warm again; you are as cold as ice.’

‘It was a warning! It was a warning!’ she repeated, shivering, as she let him put her into a low chair by the fire, and kneel by her, chafing her cold hands. ‘If it had not been three times—’ she whispered to herself.

‘Would four times have been better?’ he asked, smiling.

‘Oh, yes, yes, it would—I know—I was told——’

Again she stopped, and again Adrian muttered something. She looked up with a pale sort of smile after a time.

‘I made quite sure you would be vexed with me.’

‘Because you had a ghastly dream, sweetheart?’

‘No; because I asked you to leave Ralph at home.’

He grasped her hands still more tightly, and said to himself, ‘Now for it;’ then he spoke in a very quiet tone.

‘But I am sure you do not wish to keep Ralph at home. Now that we have talked about it, and that the impression of the dream is over——’

She released her hands by an abrupt movement.

‘You are going to tell Ralph to come with us, are not you?’ But she only stared at him with widely opened eyes.

Then Adrian took up his parable. All he said was very wise, very reasonable—very tenderly spoken. Once or twice he stumbled a little over his words, for it was hard to expound the dangers of superstition with that piteous white face, and those scared eyes gazing into his. Still, he hardened his heart and persevered; it was best for her in the end, as well as for Ralph and for himself.

‘How could Ralph ever be sensible and manly,’ he asked her, ‘if she taught him to give way to such childishness, such foolery?’

She threw up her arms, clasping them above her head, in an attitude strangely expressive of despair.

He tried to untwist the tightly-locked fingers and to hold them in his own.

‘Olga, who cares for dreams nowadays? Only poor ignorant wretches like—ahem!—I mean that only quite uneducated persons ever think of them twice after they awake. Dear, I am not hard on you; but I can’t stand seeing you make yourself a slave to such miserable prejudice.’ Then for a few minutes he was silent. ‘Olga!’ he said, his voice full of a grave energy of entreaty.

She gave in at last, only by a gesture, and with a face of despair that all but overcame his resolution. Yet he was glad at heart because he had won his victory, and because his test had not failed. For her sake he was bound not to yield weakly at the end.

‘I pledge you my life to bring back your boy all safe,’ he said, gaily, as he kissed her hands at parting; but she shook her head and smiled vaguely.

‘It was only for this one frost I asked,’ she repeated, in a dull, mechanical way; ‘only for this one.’

‘Come with us, Olga.’

But she shrank back.

In the afternoon he fulfilled his pledge, bringing back Ralph safe and sound, and delivering him with a little triumphant ceremony into his sister’s keeping.

His victory had been dull work, and he had spent a particularly tiresome morning; but it had been worth while being bored. He would fain have made a little

joke of it with Olga ; but she still looked wan and weary, as if a great strain had been put upon her, though she smiled, and was very gentle to him.

It was the next day, when Adrian knew nothing about it, that Ralph got up in the morning before it was light, to go upon the ice. It had begun to thaw slightly the night before, and he wanted to make the most of what would in all probability be the last hours of the frost. So he woke Keith Grantley, and they two stole out of the house in the iron-gray dawn of day.

Two hours later, as Adrian stood at his window, looking out at a drizzling rain, half snow, half sleet, he saw a straggling group of people coming up from the direction of the mere.

Why it was that his heart absolutely stopped beating for a moment he could not tell. There flashed across him the remembrance of Olga's dream. The next instant he smiled at himself, or tried to smile, for he did not quite like the way these people were coming straight over the snowy grass toward the garden-front of the house. They were carrying something among them. Then he saw Olga rush out of the house, through the melting snow that fell on her fair, uncovered head.

He flung open his window, just as a scream rang out on the misty air, such a scream, so wild and long drawn-out, that it sounded in his ears for days.

They laid Ralph Mowbray down in the great hall, the water streaming from his hair, and the pale light falling on to his dead face. For though they went on trying every means to bring life back, he had been so long under the ice that from the first there was no ray of hope. Yes, he was dead, and it seemed but an hour or two ago that he was laughing over his sister's fears—only, as Adrian knew well, he would never have set them at naught but for his example.

At last the doctor laid down the pulseless hand, and stood back with a shake of the head. Olga flung herself face downwards on her brother's breast, and when Adrian lifted her up with gentle force, she wrenched herself free from him, and turned to cling convulsively round her nurse's

neck. As he approached, Ulrica gathered the girl closer to her breast, with a fierce defiant gesture that angered him even in that moment of grief and horror. He put his hand on Olga's shoulder, and then she turned and faced him.

She was scarcely recognisable. Her features were working spasmodically, her eyes widely opened, and her lips drawn back, so that he could see her little white clenched teeth.

'I will never speak to you again,' she said in a loud, painful whisper.

Her head fell forward on to Ulrica's neck, and the old woman lifted her in her arms and carried her out of the hall like a child.

Olga Mowbray kept her word—that is the saddest part of the story. There were slow days and weeks during which she lay silent and apathetic, or else stood gazing out of the window from which she had seen her brother's corpse carried up from the water. At other times she wrung her hands and sobbed, in wild paroxysms of remorse and despair, the thought of her neglected dream torturing her like a crime.

Ulrica guarded her jealously, suffering only her grandmother and the doctor to approach her. Lady Gertrude was old, and the shock of Ralph's death had told heavily on her. She also, Adrian saw with exasperation, seemed to be falling under the Norse woman's sullen influence. 'You must ask Ulrica—Ulrica knows best—' Thus she always set aside Adrian's vehement entreaties to be allowed to see Olga.

It half maddened him to be kept away from her, and to know that her mind was being poisoned against him, and the misfortune of Ralph's death turned into a barrier to stand between them. If only he could once see her, and induce her to listen to reason, he felt sure that all would be well.

And one day, without any warning, he went to the door of Olga's sitting-room and knocked, entering quietly and quickly, before the slow steps he heard within could reach the door. Ulrica, standing just close to it, tried to bar his way, but he put her aside and went on. Olga was sitting on a window-seat, leaning back against the shutter, her hands clasped behind her head. She raised herself slowly as her

lover came near, and stood facing him with fixed eyes like those of a sleep-walker. But when he stood close beside her, holding out his arms, and uttering her name in a tone of passionate entreaty, she put her fingers into her ears with a sharp cry of pain. The next moment Ulrica had come to her side. Adrian never knew if she laid her hand on the girl; it seemed as if Olga passed by him like a flash of light and vanished through an open door into the room within. Ulrica followed her closely, scowling at him as she went, and he heard her turn the key in the lock.

Olga was very ill, they told him after this. The doctor said he might have killed her—he must never again make such a rash attempt.

There was nothing left for him but submission. He insisted on his grandmother's sending for a great London physician, and to him he told his story, but only to meet with the same rebuff. The girl's mind had been unhinged by the shock of her brother's death, and must be given time to recover itself. Perfect quiet was essential. Meantime Adrian would be better out of the way, since the mere mention of his name appeared to distress and excite her. Her recovery might be much hastened if she could be told that he was out of England for a time. Things would probably alter for the better within the next few months, for there was really no definite disease, only the effects of too sudden a blow, and of this remorse for a fancied crime.

Adrian ground his teeth. 'I will go round the world,' he said, bitterly, 'if it will do her any good; but you are making a blunder. You leave the enemy who is killing her close beside her.'

The doctor smiled courtcously, and promised that he would give all requisite cautions to the young lady's attendant. Adrian felt for the moment as if he hated him only less than Ulrica herself, but he had to own himself powerless.

Olga remained at Wildenhall. The place belonged to her now, for, failing Ralph, her grandfather's last will left it to her absolutely, and without condition. This made things even harder for Adrian, since he felt that it was

more difficult to force himself upon her. The old Squire had left him a younger son's portion.

He went round the world because he had said he would. It was only at rare intervals (for he was perpetually on the move) that letters from England reached him, but they generally contained good news, and every month strengthened his belief that Olga was getting better.

At last he was on his way home. At Trieste he found a packet of English letters awaiting his arrival. As he turned them over, he saw with a great start that one of them was from Olga.

It was the strangest letter. She was married. The short note was signed Olga Grantley. It had all come about very suddenly and quickly, and by her own wish there had been the least possible delay. She had forbidden any one to let him know until her wedding was over. She distrusted her own strength to keep her vow, she said, and it must be kept. She must never speak to him again. There would be a curse upon Adrian, she was told, if she broke her vow. How well Adrian knew the hand that dealt him that last blow! And so for his sake she had put an impassable barrier between herself and him. 'Farewell,' she wrote, 'farewell.'

Adrian Mowbray was too proud a man to complain, he devoured his rage and his despair in silence. He blamed neither Olga nor her young husband. Keith Grantley was a good youth, and without a doubt was devoted to his pale young bride. If only his father had been living still, Adrian felt sure that this ill-considered marriage would have been prevented. But he gathered from the letters that Sir George Grantley died soon after his own departure from England. No, to have been met and foiled by an enemy he despised, as he despised Ulrica, added a sharp sting to his bitter regret. But she had been too crafty for him, and too strong; he must needs endure his defeat as best he could.

Olga had floated from him like a wreath of mist. He heard that her husband took her away in a yacht almost immediately after their marriage, and that they had gone

North, to cruise along the Norwegian coasts, and among its lonely fiords. Her mother's country had always possessed a very strong attraction for Olga—he remembered that.

A few months passed, and then there came to Adrian another letter, as strange, and as laden with woful tidings, as the one which at Trieste came to turn his future life into a blank.

This letter was dated from Christiania, and it said: 'My wife Olga is dead. She died last week on board the Mermaid yacht off Thronthjen. I am bringing her home to bury her, as she wished, at Wildenhall. Immediately after our marriage she made a will, with my full consent, and she left everything she had in the world to you. I am glad Wildenhall belongs to you. I never wish to see the place again. I wish neither you nor I had ever seen Olga. She might have been living now, and happy with dear old Ralph at Wildenhall.'

Ten years had passed since that day. Adrian had one or two friends who were devoted to him—men capable of making real sacrifices for the love they bore him. They stood by him, and helped him through the period of violent grief that followed his cousin's death. It was a strong and silent agony which he could scarcely have got through alone, but he came out of it at last, an older and a very much harder man. The possession of Wildenhall he counted only as a burden, and he would fain have rejected it, but as Keith Grantley steadily refused to have anything to do with it, Adrian knew that, even if Olga's will could be set aside, the estate must revert to him as his grandfather's heir-at-law. So he made no useless protestations, but for several years he would not go near the place. His first visit to it was for the purpose of attending Lady Gertrude Mowbray's funeral, and then he and Keith Grantley met again.

All through the service in the church Adrian stood with his eyes fixed on the new white tomb in the Mowbray Chapel, with its simple inscription, 'To the Fair and Dear Memory of Olga;' and all resentment against her young

husband passed away from him. To each of them that day the image of their lost love was far nearer and more present than that of the old woman full of years and of sorrows, whom they were laying to her rest.

As years passed on, Keith Grantley, now married again, became one of Adrian's closest friends. The romance of his youth was closed and done away with.

But none the less John Mowbray was right in saying that it had cast a shadow across his life.

The like shadow had fallen over Wildenhall. Fancies are swiftly woven round an empty house. 'Folk will talk though it was ever so,' as the cottagers round said of one another. 'I never see nothin'—bless you, nor never shall, I expect. But John Loveday he du say——' No, it really was not wonderful, all things considered, that 'chance-times' passers-by were positive that they saw a pale young face looking through one of the windows of the Hall, and on wintry days, especially when a thaw was coming, caught glimpses of a white figure flitting down the straight walk leading to the mere.

'Upon my word and honour, you know,' as Dick Heathcote, of the Grange, was wont to observe, 'upon my word and honour, that house up yonder is not a cheerful place after a snow-storm. What with the mist rolling up from the mere, and hanging over those unwholesome fish-ponds, and what with the cut yew-trees muffled in snow, like dead folk standing in their winding-sheets, not to mention the hooting of owls from the chapel in, and the wind and the wild-fowl rustling in the reed-beds, why, there's no kind of trick the imagination might not play a man—on a winter's evening, don't you know?'

And if Mr. Heathcote confessed as much—matter-of-fact Mr. Heathcote, of whose imagination nobody so much as suspected the existence—why, mere ordinary mortals might fairly be excused for whatever they heard, or saw, or fancied.

CHAPTER IV

‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways.’

A DARK night, a strange tract of country, and an untried bit of life.

Now and then a cross-road over the heath, leading away into the night—the black outline of a plantation—a spark of light from a cottage window—a gray milestone.

There lies a weariful length of straight white high-road, stretching away in front, which touched Rhona Somerville with an involuntary presage of monotony and loneliness, as the Grange carriage travelled noiselessly along it.

Wildenhall Heath—Wildenhall village lies a mile or two from the station. Beyond that row of fir-trees is Wildenhall fen. Turning slowly round and round against that bit of slate-coloured sky are the sails of Wildenhall windmill.

A strange road that you pass over after nightfall is always full of possibilities. Rhona sat peering out of the carriage window into the baffling darkness. Whose house is that yonder with its windows cheerily alight? Is that dark building dimly visible athwart the gloom a church? And those white things in the field beyond, are they sheep or tombstones? Yes, sheep surely, for one moves, and a dog is barking. It is only a barn after all. How very dark it is under these trees that stretch suddenly across the road! Yonder children, huddled up under the hedge, upon whom the carriage-lamps flash for a moment as it passes by, are familiar enough with all these half-seen mysteries.

A sharp turn into a cross lane leaves the high-road to

go its solitary way over the heath. Now they come to a line of fir-trees—rugged, heavy-topped Scotchmen—a splash of water from a little stream that runs across the road—a flare of red light starting out blindingly, passed by and left behind, before there is time to see the blacksmith's forge, its furnace all aflame, scarlet flame-colour lighting up a man's face, as he stands, a dark outline amid a shower of sparks, with brawny, fire-painted arms upraised to strike upon an anvil.

Farm-buildings next, and the glimmer of a pond. A white horse's head thrust over the gate of what must be a straw-yard—feathery masses of foliage—more lighted windows, and here and there shadows on the wall, seen through an open door—the village. Then a long line of park palings, till a little farther on the carriage sweeps round to stop at a lodge gate. While it is being slowly opened, the church clock strikes. Rhona hears the sound of children's voices, of blows struck on the anvil, the creaking of a cart-wheel farther up the lane, and the shrill, untimely crow of an awakened cock.

After that nothing but overarching trees, till Mrs. Somerville grasps her daughter's arm.

'Rhona, the dear old Grange! Oh, there are the brothers. There is Dick! There is Geoffrey.'

There were two men standing in the deep, heavily timbered porch, one silent, the other talking loudly enough for three. 'Don't tell me; that train is always late. I shall write to the *Times* to-morrow. My watch must have gained! My watch never gains. Besides, I heard the church clock strike half a minute ago. I suppose you believe in the church clock?'

The younger brother looked about thirty-five. He was a sailor—rather a hero in his way, but blind. The other one, Dick Heathcote—the one who talked—was neither young nor a hero: he was an excellent man, and the master of the Grange.

A pronounced bachelor, Dick Heathcote entertained decided views as to the requirements of women, and when once he had fairly embraced a theory he held stoutly to it,

regardless of contradiction. Ladies, in his opinion, were ready for a cup of tea at any hour of the day. They likewise needed a great deal of repose. Older ladies ought to be kept constantly supplied with footstools and fire-screens. Young ladies were intended by nature to make themselves useful in the village, and to carry broth in a basin to the cottages.

So, energetically acting up to his lights, Dick Heathcote hurried the new-comers in to a substantial tea, and then whirled them off to their own rooms to get a good rest before dinner.

Rhona felt very blank indeed when the door of the pink-chintz room closed on her, and her uncle's self-satisfied step receded down the passage. It was quite early still: she had not the faintest wish to rest, but she did not know her way about the house, and she had no book.

Outside the window, only silence and darkness again. It was an old-fashioned lattice window, and the fastening was primitive. Rhona managed with a great effort to push it back, but she could see and hear nothing. The moist air floated into the room, and the deep stillness was broken presently by a faint, lazy 'moo' from an invisible field, and then a sheep coughed—a hollow consumptive cough. Oh yes, by the way; of course Uncle Dick was a great farmer. Well, she was afraid that sheep of his was in a bad way, poor thing!

What a wonderful sense of remoteness there was about the atmosphere of this place! She had begun to feel it creeping over her in the train, when the red sunset burned over the Essex marshes, and when they pulled up at desolate little roadside stations after it grew dark. Everybody seemed to be asleep on those dreary little platforms. Not a passenger got in or out. The train itself stood puffing drowsily, oblivious of its goal at Norwich. Just one heavy step, and one slow-speaking voice might be heard in the distance, and an indistinct man seen, smoking his pipe as he leant against the railings.

And after they left the train, that endless chalk-white road (wherein Rhona saw her future life as in a parable),

with never a wayfarer to break its monotony, going away—away across the heath.

Should they all fall asleep together here? Who would brace Mrs. Somerville to her work, and inspire her when she flagged, as John Mowbray would have done? Not debonnair Uncle Dick, with his bachelor hospitality, nor Geoffrey Heathcote with that patient smile.

Rhona fell to wondering about Geoffrey. How could he bear to be chained down to this village in the fens? Geoffrey—her brother Laurie's hero, an embodiment, in the boy's eyes, of Sir John Franklin, and Robinson Crusoe, and Lord Nelson, rolled into one. Geoffrey, the most restless and reckless, the bravest and blithest of sailors only a few years ago. The family hero who kept all his relations proudly grumbling because they were never out of hot water on his account. Either he was fighting in a gunboat in China; or he was exploring in the Arctic; or he had just been shipwrecked on a coral reef; or he meant to lead some desperate expedition to discover the source of an African river.

He was struck blind by lightning, in a tropical storm off St. Lucia, and his career ended. Dick, good fatherly Dick, rushed to fetch him home, and fluttered over him like an old hen over a duckling. But the poor duckling had done with the water.

He could just see now to grope his way about the house. Dick would have told you that he was always cheerful.

Rhona closed her window, and surveyed her indoors domain. A sparkling fire lighted up its nooks and corners, and a kettle simmered and bubbled on the hob; not a book was to be seen anywhere—shelf upon shelf laden with old china lined the panelled walls, but not a book.

Doubtless this old Grange was built hundreds of years before printing was invented, and Rhona doubted whether anything so new-fangled as a book had ever made its way into its quaint old chambers. The staircase was black and its steps uneven with age, the hall had oaken rafters, and a high open fireplace. It might have been the dining-hall of

some old college. 'But where,' asked Rhona tragically, 'are the books?'

Not in the room surely where the tea-table was spread—that astounding tea-table, groaning under the weight of plum-cakes innumerable, and crusty home-made loaves, and harvest buns, and muffins, and jam, and butter, and thick cream—not there. There was only one tiny sliding book-case in that room. Rhona peeped at it hurriedly while Uncle Dick was buttering hot toast. Some people coming into a new room look at the pictures, some at the furniture, others at the view from the window. It depends. Rhona looked at the books. It did not take her very long, but their titles made a certain impression on her. Hole's *Book about Roses*, *My Farm of Five Acres*, *Proverbial Philosophy*, Thomson's *Seasons* (splendidly bound, but its purple morocco sides a little faded), Bloomfield's *Norfolk*, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, Paley's *Theology*, and a Farming Manual or two. That was all.

Dinner at last, and Mr. Heathcote talking about roses! Roses played a great part at the Grange—roses, and pigs, and conifers, and model cottages.

'Yes, we generally muster a rose for the dinner-table by hook or by crook,' and he glanced complacently at the great softly-tinted mass of cream and salmon colour in the middle of the table, 'pretty near all the year round, even though it may be but a handful of Gloires de Dijon like this. But we get our Maréchal Niels in early with a little heat—just a little heat; and my particular favourites the Fortune's Yellow—as fine a rose as you may care to see. Oh, it only needs a trifle of care—nothing out of the way. I take pains with my roses, though, I am free to confess, and they repay me. I know nothing that repays one better than a bit of care and study bestowed on roses.'

'Dick is terribly vain of his roses, Rhona,' said the younger uncle.

'Come, come, old man'—Dick was enchanted—'you shouldn't say that. Here we shall have Rhona, and Magdalen, too, expecting no one knows what. Not that we do so badly either, all things considered. Now, last

summer there was a rose show at Ely—as fine a show as ever I saw. We took a pretty good lot there—only hybrid perpetuals, but not bad ones. We got the first prize for our cut blooms, and I won't say it was any such great surprise to me; though it was a first-rate show, mind you—finer all round, I take it, than the great show at Norwich. But there, I'm not going to say it's worth all the trouble and worry beforehand. Bless me, what a time we had of it, to be sure, Reynolds and I! The rain came on just two days before we had to cut our roses; two days, fancy—heavy thunder-showers—the very thing to dash the blossoms most, if we had set to work to spoil them. "It's all up, sir," Reynolds said to me, with the tears standing in his eyes, "it's all up," he says. You recollect that thunderstorm, old man?

'To be sure I do.'

'Old Palmer (that's our great man in the parish, Rhona—Mowbray's biggest tenant—a churchwarden, too), he came to me grumbling about his hay. "Don't talk to me about your hay, Palmer," I said to him; "what's' hay? I'm thinking about roses," I said. And yet I am a pretty keen farmer myself in my small way, and don't care to have my hay sopped more than my neighbours do, and Palmer knows that; but, bless you! when there's a rose show on, Reynolds and I care for nothing else.'

Mr. Heathcote had the talk pretty nearly to himself; no one was disposed to interrupt him. Rhona was watching her mother, wondering with involuntary impatience at the expression of serenity that was dawning on her face. It was a long time since she had seen her look so placid and content.

Geoffrey Heathcote sat absently stroking his brown beard, answering only when he was spoken to, and then with a slight start and hesitation as if he had to call his thoughts back from afar.

But Dick was nothing daunted.

'Well, Magdalen,' he said, later in the evening, rubbing his hands and surveying with unfeigned satisfaction the slight figure leaning back in an arm-chair by the fire—his

‘sister had always been his type of graceful womanhood—
‘well, Magdalen, pretty comfortable, eh?’

He paused to hunt out an unwieldy footstool from its remote corner, and to bring it to her feet. It would have brought her knees up to a level with her chin if she had used it, but it was Dick’s way of proffering his homage. Fortunately for his sister, one of the dogs on the rug viewed it with favourable eyes. Rising with a stretch, he leapt sleepily upon the footstool, turned round twice, curled himself up, and lay blinking at his master.

‘Well, Magdalen,’ Dick said for the third time, ‘so here we are again. You are to be as dull here, and as idle as you please—go to sleep all day long if you like it—nobody to disturb you but Geoffrey or myself. Liberty Hall, you know.’

Rhona turned round eagerly. ‘Yes, Uncle Dick, only——’

‘Now you just be quiet, Rhona, there’s a good girl. You shall look after the schools and old women to your heart’s content; carry soup in a basin about all day long, if you like—clergyman’s daughter, quite proper that you should; but as for your mother, why, I knew her before you were born, and I haven’t forgotten what she likes and dislikes, I daresay!’

‘But, Uncle Dick——’

Mrs. Somerville glanced at her daughter.

‘You mustn’t make me quite idle, Dick. I wrote to you about the great task that I have undertaken.’

Dick looked disconcerted. ‘Ah well, yes—to be sure—yes. All in good time. Take a good rest first,’ he added, brightening. ‘I am sure you need it. Geoff and I are very quiet chaps, are not we, old man? We shan’t be in your way.’

Geoffrey had drawn his chair out of the circle of light. He sat with his head bowed. Old Nell, the black retriever, had brought him a puppy in her mouth, from her family basket in the kitchen, and he was turning the glossy, growling lump of floss silk over and over absently in his strong brown hands. Nell sat by, meantime, with proud,

satisfied eyes, now and then lifting a paw to put it on his knee, just to remind him that it was her child he was handling, and that he possessed her full confidence and approbation.

The spell of patient inaction had wrought upon him, thought Rhona; would it fall next upon her mother? Late in the evening she went to Mrs. Somerville's room.

'You are glad to be here, mother,' she said, putting her arm round her.

'It is very homelike, Rhona,' she replied, dreamily, 'very restful!'

She stood by the fire holding a delicate china jar that she had taken off the high wooden mantelshelf, in her white fingers.

'Crown Derby—it belonged to my grandmother. This house is full of old china. Isn't it pretty? Look, Rhona.'

'Very pretty, mother. This quiet place will be just the thing for your work, won't it?'

'I think so. I hope so.'

She put down the jar quickly, and folded her hands, looking up at Rhona with something of the expression of a child promising to do its lesson.

Rhona saw, but would not heed.

'To-morrow we must unpack the big box with all the papers. I shall never rest till I see you settled in that nice deep window in the next room. You will begin in earnest then.'

'Yes; I shall begin in earnest then.'

Mrs. Somerville sank down in a low chair as she spoke. There was a travelling clock on the table near her. Still looking up at Rhona, she drew it near her and struck the repeater,

'Half-past eleven,' she said, with a stifled yawn.

There are moments when the veriest trifles have power to chill or to cheer. Rhona kissed her mother without another word, and went away to her own room.

There were hot, unreasonable tears smarting in her eyes, and she said 'Father' half aloud once or twice, as she paced up and down the room. She was sad and angry too.

'Father, you would say, "Be patient;" but this place is all roses, and soft cushions, and rest, and sleep, instead of work'—and she struck her foot on the floor—'hard, honest, wholesome work.'

Suddenly, like a faint whispered answer, the words seemed to be breathed near her: 'Wait—wait patiently.' They were not spoken—they were only carried to her by a few soft notes of music, but wedded to that music were the words.

She stood still, listening. Where could it come from?—this sweetest, softest snatch of far-off music—these rich chords that swelled and died away, and presently trembled into momentary triumph like a hymn of praise? Rhona drew aside the window-curtain, and then she knew. Her room was in a corner of the house, and in another angle was an unshuttered window that sent a shaft of light streaming on to the grass below. Near this window sat Dick Heathcote, under a reading-lamp, his pipe in his mouth, and a huge ledger open before him, over which he pored with an absorbed expression. She could not see the face of his companion, who sat drawn back into the shadow, but the light traced the polished outline of a violoncello, and touched the slow-moving brown hand that moved the bow.

For a long time Rhona stood with a quieted heart, listening to Geoffrey's tender and pathetic music, as it went sighing out into the night, and watching the business frown on Uncle Dick's brow as he ran his finger up column after column of his ledger.

November, for all its bad name, is often a beautiful month in the Eastern Counties—a season of hazy, opal-tinted mornings, of brilliant noons, and of gorgeous sunsets over the fens. The peculiar charm of the wide flat country steals over you by degrees—its space, its colouring, its extraordinary calm.

had Rhona, the most impressionable of mortals, felt herself basket into captivity the first morning, as she stood in the growling le-hued sunshine, her feet buried in freshly-fallen strong growing up at the Grange.

The house possessed in full measure the homely dignity of a respectable old age. The deep porch, the twisted chimneys, and wide lattices, the rich red of the brickwork, the plastered walls bound together by heavy timbers of cunning pattern, the overhanging eaves broken by dormer windows—each and all gravely asserted its claim to veneration. It was different from many old houses, inasmuch as its owners had never cared to restore or enlarge it, but only ministered respectfully to its necessities. They just loved it, and took care of it, giving it a patch here or a prop there, as occasion required ; but for the rest, they left it as it was.

Pale winter roses peeped out of the ivy that mantled the walls. From the bare stems of the creepers still hung here and there a spray of crimson leaves. Starlings fluttered about the high-tiled roofs.

Some of the scattered cottages came straggling up near to the garden wall. Mr. Heathcote found no fault with that ; it pleased him best to live in the heart of his kingdom. It was but a hamlet. He and Mrs. Bloomfield, the curate's wife, ruled it despotically between them.

Of course Adrian Mowbray was by rights the lord of the manor ; but, absorbed in cares of state and literary work, he was altogether too big a man for Wildenhall—happily for Dick Heathcote, who would have ill brooked a divided sceptre. And the old Rector of Wildenhall lived two or three miles away, in his other parish, Hithersea-in-the-Marsh. The church at Wildenhall was far grander, and the rectory a better and larger house ; but Everard Mowbray had never been an ambitious man. Hithersea was the home of his youth ; he began life there as a curate, and had grown to love the place and the people ; so when in his turn he became rector of the two parishes, he elected to stay on quietly at Hithersea, and Mr. Bloomfield was growing gray as curate of Wildenhall.

If Dick Heathcote despotically ruled the village, some said that Mrs. Bloomfield and Reynolds the gardener ruled Mr. Heathcote in their turn. About Reynolds's tyranny he was silent, but he spoke of the curate's wife with a superior

and compassionate smile. She was fond of the sound of her own voice, was Mrs. Bloomfield, and always wanted to have the last word, poor soul ! Well, she was perfectly welcome to it for his part. When they met in conference, both talked and neither listened.

Rhona Somerville began her new life in a spirit of the bravest resolution. Impressed as she had been with the whispered message of patience that Geoffrey's music carried to her, she had no wish to be at war with her surroundings. She yielded passively to Mrs. Bloomfield's sway, made friends with all the village, accepted a class in the school, and meekly received her share of a certain small trousseau, which was being manufactured in hot haste for one of Mrs. Atkin's twin babies.

Perhaps she might have worked at it with better heart if her mother had not taken so kindly to the wee shirts and flannel petticoats, and looked so contented sitting by the fire, with some diminutive white garment on her lap.

'I cannot write all day, Rhona !'

Mrs. Somerville, looking up to thread her needle, had found her daughter's eyes fixed wistfully on her face. She spoke deprecatingly, yet with an accent of impatience.

'No, mother ; oh no !' Rhona answered, gently, and she turned to leave the room. She often went away, because she felt that her involuntary watchfulness was a trial to her mother. She was striving to be patient and very reasonable ; but her wishes were strong, and—the dean was right after all—the fatal impetuosity of youth possessed her.

One day she and Mr. Heathcote and Mrs. Bloomfield were standing on the road just beyond the village. A frosty sunset flamed behind the Scotch firs in Wildenhall Park, and in the bare hedge one red bramble leaf was fluttering, looking like a torn shred blown down from the western clouds.

As usually happened, Uncle Dick and Mrs. Bloomfield were both talking at once—he was sitting on his stout cob, she carried a basket, and Rhona held a big bundle in her arms.

The girl was not listening to her companions.

'The common round,' she was repeating to herself, 'the daily task, should furnish all I ought to ask,' and unconsciously she pressed the bundle closer to her breast.

Then her uncle's words caught her attention. He was telling Mrs. Bloomfield about the great enterprise that was all in all to her, speaking of it in a cheerful, slighting way that Rhona felt very hard to bear.

'My poor dear sister is putting together a little memoir of her husband, I believe. That's what keeps her within doors so much. I'm sure I hope the amusement of looking over old papers cheers her, poor dear woman, and passes away the time.'

'Yes, it makes a nice change from needle-work, no doubt. Writing is a pleasant occupation, and I don't know but what——'

'She ought to be in the fresh air—that's what I say to her, instead of hanging all day over a parcel of old letters, which would have been better torn up ages ago.'

'For although he makes a great secret of it'—Mrs. Bloomfield was not the woman to be balked of her story—'and that I cannot say for certain, I think we have some kind of a writer in the parish already. Between you and me, I rather suspect, putting two and two together, that Dr. Leach writes for one of the medical journals.'

'Burn or tear, that's my principle,' pursued Mr. Heathcote, unheeding. 'The waste-paper basket is the proper place for nineteen out of twenty letters a man gets.'

'Such thick, heavy letters,' with a mysteriously lowered voice, 'go from Dr. Leach's house to the post. They can't be his accounts, by their shape (besides, you know how hard it is to get Dr. Leach to send in his bill), nor yet orders for the chemist——'

'I don't see why they shouldn't be,' the spirit of contradiction prevailing over Mr. Heathcote's love of his own topic. 'I make no doubt that's precisely what they are—orders for the chemist.'

'But I got a hint,' Mrs. Bloomfield went on in triumph; 'and so, a time or two when I met Page the postman close to the surgery gate, I just cast an eye on the letters before

he had them in his bag, and they were directed to some editor on Ludgate Hill, as well as I could make out. So I believe he writes—on medical subjects, no doubt.'

'And why on earth shouldn't the poor man write whatever he pleases, provided he does not neglect his patients?'

'That's just where it is, Mr. Heathcote. That's just what I am coming to. I confess I didn't feel quite satisfied in my own mind about that bad leg of Mrs. Shaw's. I had my doubts about Dr. Leach being as attentive as he should be then. There was something queer about that leg. You recollect you had to send her off to the County Hospital after all. It began to get worse just at harvest time, and I said to the doctor when I happened on him at young Mrs. Oxer's, the time her little boy was born, "Doctor," I said, "I think the woman Shaw's leg wants seeing after in a special kind of way."'

Mr. Heathcote said 'Pooh, pooh!' but he leant a little lower over his saddle.

'The doctor spoke up very sharp then (for he is short of temper at times, and I'm sure it's no wonder—a parish doctor has a trying time). Still, it's my belief he hadn't been at hers, for better than a week.'

'Well, is the woman dead?' The case was beginning to look serious against Dr. Leach.

'Oh no! she's nicely now—but as I was saying, I believe Dr. Leach writes,' nodding her head; 'and it would be more prudent for a man with a young family—an increasing family, Miss Somerville—just to leave authorship to people who have nothing better to do with their time.'

The last words were addressed to Rhona. Her uncle, finding nothing tangible was to come of Mrs. Shaw's mismanaged leg, had ridden off indignant. A formal complaint against the parish doctor was a thing to be looked into seriously; but this was evidently one of Mrs. Bloomfield's mare's-nests.

So he jog-trotted away over a turnip-field on his Suffolk punch—Mrs. Bloomfield tramped cheerfully through the puddles, and Rhona moralised. 'The common task' filled up all their needs—that was evident. These village people

too, toiling with apathetic faces and plodding feet along the rough pathway of their narrow lives, did either joy or sorrow stir them very deeply?' What of the poor washerwoman, for example, whom she and Mrs. Bloomfield had come to visit?' Her son—her only son—was lying upstairs, stricken down by an accident, and hanging between life and death.

'How hard it seems for you! How can you bear it?' Rhona asked, wringing her hard hand, as she hurried back to her washing-tub, after ushering her boy's visitor upstairs. The girl's face was full of sympathy, and her voice quivered.

'Lawk, my dear,' and the poor mother dried her eyes on her apron, before plunging her arms back into the soap-suds. 'Lawk, my dear, I fare to think life will be a poorer job if it please the Lord to take him, but that I have got to "leave."'

A poorer job! Rhona thought how bitterly she had rebelled at being left without her father—how passionately she still mourned him. Yet what more had his loss been to her than that which this poor soul awaited with a quiet tear or two? A poorer job—much poorer—that was all. Later, she learned to understand something of the pathetic patience and long-suffering of these quiet-spoken country folk; as yet their seeming apathy puzzled and chilled her.

She left the house, and went to lean over a gate on the opposite side of the road. The double cottage, where the sick youth lay, was very lonely; across the gate she saw the fen stretching away for miles, with its black earth and its dried grass, and a peat-stack, and some dykes filled with dark-hued, shining water.

'Sarvent, miss,' said a voice behind her, and turning, Rhona was aware of an old individual in a smock-frock, bent nearly double with rheumatism, hobbling on two sticks towards her.

'Sarvent, miss. That ere wumman from the parsonage be up along o' Jeremiah Prentiss's bo', baint she?' and he pointed with one crutch towards the window of the sick-room.

'Mrs. Bloomfield?' said Rhona, amused. 'Yes, she is.

‘Don’t you like her?’ For her new friend was winking at her.

‘Noo! noo! Not but what the wumman intenders well as far as she know. I believe she du, and the man likewise. But I don’t hold o’ their ways—my name’s Bell, miss, and I’m on my eighty-tu.’

So he and Rhona shook hands, after he had propped himself up against the gate, and shifted both his sticks into one hand, with a succession of heart-rending groans. Mr. Bell seemed inclined to be communicative.

‘Noo! noo. I don’t hold o’ their new-fangled ways, and that’s the truth. Here and theer, in and out, a spoying and a proying round. I mind the old parson—uncle to him over at Hithersea, a nice pice (pious) ow’d gen’elman he were, quite (which means quiet) as quite could be, and won’erful fond of his gun. Bless you, he knew where the birds lay,’—another wink,—‘and never said nothin’ to nobody, nor nobody said nothin’ to him. Them was the good old times, them were.’

‘Then would you rather Mr. Bloomfield never came to see you?’

‘Lawk, no. I don’t mind if I du have him in at mine, chance times. (’Tis a bit lonsome, for I don’t neighbour with them Prentiss folk, nor ever could, in coorse.) The parson’s good company, I will say for him, and knows what rheumatiz is roight well. Claps down on that there old chair o’ mine, and says he, “I’ve got a twinge last day or two, Bell, along of the damp,” he sa’ to me, “that I have,” he sa’. And I make no doubt but what the man have. Still I don’t hold with much tongue.’ The old man stopped abruptly, and his dim eyes brightened. ‘There she goe,’ pointing with his stick across the water. ‘There goe the little mawther from Hithersea.’

Rhona looked over to Hithersea Mere. The wide waste of water was just now overhung by a low-lying sunset, and the whole scene struck her as full of poetry, and yet as ineffably melancholy. The dark-dyed water stained crimson here and there beneath the clouds, the rustling reeds along the shore, the water-fowl rising in flocks, their wings as they

flitted upwards caught by gleams of opal. Some way out on the mere a boat was sweeping silently along, rowed by a woman, and a boy was sitting on the gunwale.

'Ah,' sighed Mrs. Bloomfield, coming out of the cottage to join Rhona, 'it's that queer child, Hilary Marston, and the boy Ned Hawker with her. Ah!' she shook her head. 'The dear archdeacon lets her do just what she likes, and I must say your two uncles are not much better. They both do their best to spoil her. 'Tis a strange kind of life the girl leads. This morning she had a rat-hunt in the tithe-barn over at Hithersea, and all the boys in the place were after her. Old Graves, the rat-catcher, stopped at mine with his ferrets on his way home, and he got talking of it.'

'Poor Hilary!' said Rhona, watching the lonely boat.

Hilary was Archdeacon Mowbray's grandchild.

Wild and solitary as was Wildenhall, Hithersea-in-the-Marsh was a far wilder spot. It lay in the very heart of the fens. Hilary Marston had grown up there from babyhood. It was no great wonder that the old man spoilt the little orphan child, who had come like a flower in autumn to brighten his solitary home; and Dick Heathcote and his brother—so Mrs. Bloomfield said—had done their best to help him.

Hilary had been welcome all her life at the farm, and in the house and gardens of the Grange. The little maiden never felt more at home than when she was sitting perched on the gate of Dick Heathcote's straw-yard, or wandering across the hay-fields with blind Geoffrey's hand upon her shoulder.

People, however, said she was growing up a very wild flower indeed.

The first time Rhona saw her was at Hithersea, on a slate-coloured December afternoon that was trying to make up its mind to rain. Big drops hung on the hedges, and dropped lazily from the brown and sodden oak-trees, under which she and Geoffrey Heathcote drove in a little pony-carriage. They were very silent. Geoffrey, gentle and patient, and cheerful, too, as his brother said he was, was sparing of his words, and Rhona never felt that she knew

him well. The sense of his misfortune, and of his courage, and his silent suffering, oppressed her.

'This is Hithersea.' The pony had trotted over a wooden bridge, and Geoffrey looked up as the hollow sound of its hoofs told him they had crossed the boundary. A few cottages were huddled round the low vicarage wall, a sluggish canal washed it on one side; across the road, under the shadow of a row of pollard willows, rose the quaint Saxon tower and tiled roof of the little old church.

Nobody was stirring except a woman with a red shawl over her head, and a bundle of damp sticks on her shoulder. 'Miss Hilary,' she told Geoffrey, 'was over at the "music practice" in the church.'

To the church accordingly they betook themselves. In front of the porch lay a couple of dogs; one, a magnificent black retriever, keeping watch and ward with his big guarding paw over some bulrushes that had been thrown upon the path; the other, a truculent-looking fox-terrier, who showed his teeth and the whites of his eyes, and growled defiantly.

From within the church sounded the wheezy strains of an antiquated harmonium, and the voices of singing children.

Geoffrey leant against the porch, and Rhona pushed back the half-open door and went down two worn steps into the aisle.

It was all whitewash inside, and high square pews of unvarnished deal, a contrast indeed to the groined roof and storeyed windows of Wildenhall Church.

This was a quiet, decaying, sleepy-looking building. One of the short thick pillars hid the choir and the harmonium. They were chanting the 'Magnificat,' as Rhona stole back into the porch. A pause, ended by the simple chords of another monotonous chant, and the children striking in with the full strength of their young, vigorous, untaught voices—

'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace,' they sang, without check or softness—shrill girls' and harsh boys' voices striving to sing down each other, and to drown the steady mechanical drone of the accompaniment. Geoffrey shook his head, and unconsciously beat time with his stick upon the pavement. 'Poor little Hilary!' he said, in a low voice.

There was a brief silence within the church, and presently the trampling of many hob-nailed boots. Out they came, tumbling into the porch, a set of ruddy, hurrying school-children, shouting, laughing, whistling, as they trooped into the road.

One little maiden, with the roundest of round faces, stayed to speak to Geoffrey, staring up at him all the while with solemn eyes. Somehow, children were always ready to thrust their hands into his hand, and to play confidingly with his stick.

‘Please, sir, Miss Hilary is shutting up the music.’

She shouldered a basket half as big as herself, and trotted away down the road, still singing snatches of the hymn they had been practising, and turning round perpetually to get another sight of Geoffrey. ‘O Paradise,’ the words came quaintly in the thin, cheery little pipe, ‘O Paradisè, ’tis weary waiting here.’ Presently breath failed her; a boy caught up the tune in a clear whistle. And so the children vanished down the lane.

A quick step sounded along the aisle—and with a kind of swing a girl came and stood in the dark frame made by the church door, a girl whose picturesque beauty almost took Flora’s breath away.

‘Good dogs!’ as her followers scrambled up to meet her. ‘Dear dogs!’

Then she caught sight of Geoffrey, and sprang forward with a quick flush of pleasure, ‘Captain!’

She was dressed in a rough pilot-coat like a boy’s, and had a red woollen fisherman’s cap set sideways on her head. Her one arm were tucked some big hymn-books, and under the other, a dog-whip with a whistle, and the key of the church door. Hers was a serious, wistful little face, that looked as if its owner took life in very sober earnest, but the smile that greeted Geoffrey Heathcote was living sunlight.

‘Oh, grandfather’s all right, thank you, and so are the dogs. Rover was looking rather thin a week ago, and I thought he seemed a little dull and out of spirits, so I took him over to the Wildenhall keeper; but he’s better now,

and has been very nice and affectionate the last day or two. How are you?' with a sudden accession of gruffness, as she shook hands with Rhona. 'Go to heel, Scamp!' and she stamped her foot at the snappish fox-terrier.

'Well, farmer, and what do you make of the weather?'

She looked up at the clouds anxiously.

'I don't know what we shall do if we have any more rain. The marsh meadows are under water as it is, and the poor Fentons will be flooded out of their house again.'

'Well, for all that, I'm afraid it's coming on wet, and I ought to be taking Rhona home. You must make friends with Rhona another day.'

Hilary looked hard at her new acquaintance. She had got her friend's hand on her shoulder by this time, an attitude that was evidently very familiar to them both, and she was guiding him across the road.

'You are coming to see grandfather?'

'Not now, we shall come in for a wetting as it is,' for small fine rain was beginning to fill the air. 'Run in out of the rain, Hilary, child.'

She tossed up her little head.

'Oh, it won't hurt *me*. I have got to go and put my donkey into her stable, for she hates the wet, poor dear! and the men go home early on Saturday. And then I must go down to the canal, for grandfather will want to hear if the water is rising. Besides the dogs don't care to go in yet, they have had their whole afternoon wasted by that choir practice,' in an injured tone.

'Well, well, Hilary, run off with your dogs, and be quick about it.'

'Are you driving him?' she asked abruptly, with a little frown, as they reached the pony-carriage. 'Take care!'

Rhona looked back as she drove off, and saw the girl already running through the silver-wet grass of a marshy meadow.

'I must hold poor Rover in his lead,' were her parting words, fastening the leather strap on to the dog's collar as she spoke, 'or he would be off after the pheasants in the carr, and then Adrian Mowbray's keeper would be down on

him. Good-night, captain. No, we shan't be long, because Patience does not like being out in the wet.'

And away she went, dragged forwards by Rover, who was straining eagerly against his collar; the spotted fox-terrier tore madly on in front; and Patience the donkey mildly trotted behind, with her head and tail stretched out.

Hilary's likes and dislikes were all quick and vehement alike. Before six weeks had passed, Dick Heathcote was teasing her about her enthusiastic devotion to Rhona.

'We shall have you setting up as a blue-stocking next,' he said, with a loud laugh, 'composing a sonnet, and reading the Fathers in the original.'

'Rhona is not a blue-stocking,' the girl answered, flushing angrily. She was not going to be laughed out of the friendship that had made a new era in her life. Of course she was not like Rhona—who was?—Rhona knew everything, and had read all the books that ever were written.

Hilary's eyes flashed; her new friend had taken her heart by storm, and she resented greatly being reminded that she had begun by being jealous of her when she first came to the Grange. Yes, it was true, she acknowledged, she *was* jealous that day that Rhona drove Geoffrey over to Hithersea, but it was horrid of her, and not the least kind of Mr. Heathcote to remind her of it. How was she to know then that Rhona was an angel?

'Of course, she is an angel,' said Mr. Heathcote, amused at the girl's fierce championship; 'but don't you think she is rather old for her age? I expected she would be more of a playfellow for you.'

A playfellow! As if she wanted a playfellow; Mr. Heathcote need not shake his head! But Uncle Dick persisted in shaking it regretfully, being among the number of those who thought that Rhona's father, by so early making a companion of her, and training her to share all his grave interests, had rubbed off some of the first bloom of her youth.

He need not have distressed himself. The little motherly air Rhona assumed towards 'the child,' as she called her friend, and her grave consciousness of the superior

weight of her years and experience, were essentially youthful. She admired and protected Hilary with all her heart, from the very first day that she rowed her boat across Hithersea Mere, and came running across the Grange meadows with a troop of dogs at her heels.

Sometimes the quaintest little cart in the world rattled into the stable-yard. Rhona, beholding the brisk gray donkey come trotting down the road, at first thought that there were two boys in the little vehicle; but on a nearer view she recognised Hilary—Hilary with her rough jersey and fisherman's cap, and her lovely face—with Ned Hawker her faithful page on the seat beside her, Patience between the shafts, and the cart laden with water-lilies from a far-off bend of the mere.

'Captain,' said Hilary, abruptly, one day, 'play that again; I like it—it reminds me of Rhona.'

It was a little Swedish air, delicate and full of spirit, yet with a thread of pathos and wistfulness running through it from end to end.

Geoffrey and his violoncello were just within the oriel window. Hilary outside, by climbing lightly up the ivy-stems, had managed to perch herself close to the open lattice.

'Do play it over again.'

Geoffrey obeyed; then, as he laid aside his bow, he said: 'I wish you would tell me what Rhona is like, Hilary.'

'Oh, I don't know,' she answered, shyly.

'But I really want to hear. Can't you describe her?'

'Not I.'

'Why did that music remind you of her?'

'Oh, just because it is like her.'

'Like her—in what way?'

She shook her head.

'Well, you certainly have no great talent for description,' he said, rather disappointed.

Hilary looked up quickly.

'Why, captain, what do you want to know?'

'I tell you I want to know what that niece of mine looks like.'

'She's good to look at.' Hilary spoke with a certain shy reluctance. 'You can't help watching her—it's nice to see her walk about.'

'Oh, I suppose she is graceful, like her mother?'

'No,' quickly, 'not a bit like her mother—not a bit—not like any one.' She stopped to consider. 'The dogs are all fond of her—even Scamp.'

He laughed. 'Well?'

'Well—you know her voice?'

'To be sure.'

'Then, captain,' triumphantly, 'she is just like her voice.'

'Humph! Have you nothing more to tell me?'

'Grandfather says he could wish to see more colour in her cheeks. Her eyes are dark gray, I think.'

'Are you not sure?'

'No. Ah, captain,' her own eyes filling with a great softness and sadness, 'if only you could see her for yourself.'

Geoffrey smiled. 'I wish I could see both you children. They tell me you are a beauty, little Hilary.'

'Stuff!' throwing back her head with a frown. 'Now, Rover—he is worth looking at, if you like.'

CHAPTER V

‘Ill blows the wind that profits nobody.’

‘YOUR mother is doing her work well—wonderfully well,’ said John Mowbray, thoughtfully.

‘Is she? Oh, is she really?’ In her interest and delight, Rhona jumped up from her chair and went to join him in the window. ‘Oh, I am so glad.’

He looked at her sharply. ‘Did you doubt it, then?’

‘No, no; of course not. At least, one cannot help getting anxious. I never meant to doubt.’

‘Try not to do so,’ he said, quietly.

Words that were easy to speak. Unjust words also, as Rhona keenly felt, though she said nothing. There had been a time in London during which his vivid powers of description and his intense appreciation of her father had kindled her into short-lived enthusiasm; but John Mowbray was just John Mowbray still—unable to see a yard beyond his nose.

It was odd, however, thought Rhona, that he should say that to her to-day, after her queer experiences of the night before. She was not yet sure whether she had been asleep or awake last night.

It was Sunday evening, and she sat up late by the fire in her own room, reading a book which the Dean of Morechester had lately sent to her mother.

For the last ten minutes she had been reflecting, one arm thrown behind her head; the book had slipped from her knee, and lay half open on the floor beside her.

It was a biography, published perhaps half a century ago, the faultless, lifeless, unshadowed, unwrinkled portrait

of an excellent man—a man who was represented as having overcome all his natural faults before the age of twenty ; as being without weaknesses ; as one who never wearied in well-doing ; who appeared to have found the royal road to holiness without a struggle, and who, having trodden down sorrow and temptation under his feet, walked in meek monotony along the path of virtue to a triumphant death.

His love of nature, his striking exterior, and pleasing manner, together with his elegant taste and ‘playful humour’—each was primly catalogued among his gifts and graces, and thereafter left to the reader’s imagination.

And the book was written by his widow.

It came upon Rhona as a revelation. While she read, she kept on saying to herself : ‘I see ; yes, I see. This is what the dean wants ; this is his model, his idea of how biographies should be written—this thin thread of eulogy, stringing together pages upon pages of correspondence, with every touch that could give life carefully left out. Yes, any one might write like this—any one—even——’ And there she stopped.

It chanced to be a stormy, blustering night ; the wind had got into the wide old chimney, and was rumbling and grumbling away there, like a couple of deep-voiced old persons holding a conversation.

Once or twice Rhona listened, almost believing that there were people talking in the room adjoining hers, but she really knew all the time that it was only the wind. Sometimes the old man—she turned them into an old man and his wife, in her idle fancy—sometimes the old man had it all his own way, and held forth for a long time, his voice rising and sinking emphatically. Sometimes the old woman burst in with a sudden shrill gust of contradiction, and they both argued at once. Then he took up his story again in a confidential undertone, and she breathed an answer every now and then. After a time a lull—then a fresh rush of wrangling voices ; but the old man was long-winded, and in the end he always got the lion’s share of talk.

And it seemed to Rhona, lying back in her arm-chair half asleep and half awake, that her thoughts had somehow

escaped from her control, and gone flying up the chimney, where, not she herself, but the old man and woman were uttering them aloud. They were familiar spirits, putting into half-articulate words the weary questions that kept vexing her own brain.

Said the old man gruffly, 'Well, it is no use disputing—the girl is right and always was. *There is something* ridiculous in expecting that a biography worthy of the name should be written off-hand by a person without experience, without enthusiasm, without any special aptitude——'

'Come, come,' in remonstrance from the old woman.

'Such a man as Jasper Somerville, forsooth! Is such a life as his to be written as if it was a letter for the penny post? I know better than that. I have not been blowing about the world so long without picking up a little experience here and there. And the old dean knows no more about the matter than the rest of them. The time is not ripe for a book to be written, that's about the truth, or at least, the man is not found who is fit for the work.'

'Yet John Mowbray made no objection.'

'John Mowbray just took things as he found them. That is his way. She was the nearest relation, and happened to be handy. Was that a reason?' his voice rising sarcastically. 'It would have been better, far better, to let the matter drop.'

'No, no;' an eager remonstrance drowned the other voice; 'a thousand times no. Anything but that. To give it up would break the girl's heart—it is her hope—her dream.'

'Ah! a dream, a dream indeed, only a dream,' and the wind died down into silence for a minute.

'Yet the poor soul works hard enough,' murmured the old woman's voice.

'Works hard!' with an indignant puff. 'I never said she didn't. That's neither here nor there. She only gets puzzled and bewildered. At first when she came here,' and then began the gossiping undertone '(it was about the time of the equinoctial gales, and I was about a good deal, and saw a thing or two), I thought she was never going to settle to her work at all. What is more, Rhona thought so

too, but then she has no confidence in her mother——
don't tell me——'

'She has perfect confidence.'

'Not she; don't tell me!' The two voices rose into a perfect hubbub.

'She has!'

'*She hasn't!*'

'It would be disloyal, undutiful, to doubt her mother's powers——'

'But she does doubt them.'

'And ungenerous——'

'Maybe——only she can't help herself.'

'Well, she tries not;,' the old woman's voice ended with a sigh.

'Tries? Yes, granted—she tries not. But she is often puzzled. She cannot make out why her mother never asks her help, why she has grown so secret and so silent, for ever turning those papers over by herself, and starting if the wind so much as ruffles them. (I tried her once or twice when she left her window open and asked me in.) And why did she choose her brother, Geoffrey Heathcote, of all people, to appeal to in her difficulties? Geoffrey Hcathcote!'—a sound that rumbled like a sarcastic laugh. 'Why, young as she is, Rhona could cope with the work better, and, what is more, she is quite aware of it.'

But here the old woman raised such an outcry, and scolded and screamed so loud in the chimney, that no one else could get a hearing for a few minutes.

When there was a lull, it appeared that the other voice had been going on doggedly all the while. 'Rhona has a consciousness of her own powers. And there are times when she wishes it had fallen to her lot to——'

Just then the clock struck twelve. Rhona woke up from her reverie with a start and a blush. Surely she had been in Dreamland; for the old man's voice had turned into the wind's grumble again, and the old woman's sigh into its melancholy moan.

Enough impression, however, remained with her next day to give a point and a sting to John Mowbray's rebuke.

Fears and doubts had come to her unawares, which she fought against and hated herself for. He did right to blame her, she confessed magnanimously, and yet——

He was staying for a few days with his uncle over at Hithersea Vicarage, for Wildenhall Abbey was shut up this winter, and his brother Adrian was in India. Why John chose the month of March for his brief holiday was known only to himself. He had a knack of picking the stones and cinders out of the cake of life. Rhona wondered whether her mother had summoned him, for on the day after his arrival he was taken into those counsels from which she was rigidly excluded, and he came over every morning for a conference.

The winter, strictly speaking, was over, and the days had begun to lengthen. January snows had given place to February floods, and now March had come, and the cruel scourge of the east wind was laid across the land.

It may have been good discipline, perhaps, for John Mowbray to walk over daily from Hithersea, in the teeth of the blast from the mere, with benumbed fingers and long flying coat. It could hardly be called pleasure-seeking.

Black, bitter, biting—how that east wind blew! how it dried, and parched, and hardened the poor earth, binding it fast in misery and iron! The Grange dogs, each with one ear blown on to the top of his head, and tail wagging to windward, were fain to come crouching under the deep porch for shelter. The gulls flying from Hithersea Mere towards the freshly-ploughed fields, were swept westward whether they would or not, and kept tacking laboriously in the air. The thin clouds drove wildly across a cold blue sky, writhing and rolling over one another, as they scudded along.

‘Fine seasonable weather,’ said Mr. Heathcote, standing red, and blue, and insultingly cheerful in the garden, and signalling with his spud to the comfortable people within, to open the window. In swept the wind with a howl, upsetting a top-heavy pot of daffodils, scattering music and newspapers, blowing a few letters into the fire, and then escaping up the chimney like a roar of artillery.

'A peck of March dust is worth a king's ransom,' went on the cheerful voice. 'I say, come out, Geoff; don't stay shivering over the fire all day.'

Going out had risen into a deed of heroism, wayfarers as seen from the window wore such a pitiful aspect, with their half-closed eyes and blue noses. One plunge round the sheltering angle of the house, and the wind is down on you, tearing in rough horse-play at clothes, and hair, and hats, and striking chills into the very marrow of your bones.

'Lawk-a-mercy'—Reynolds the gardener came up with chattering teeth, bearing in his hand a blackened branch of laurestina, that looked as if it had been through the fire. 'Just you go and look at them young *squashers*, sir, anenst the fence.'

'What, the Sequoias? Touched up, are they? Bless my heart, such fine young trees, too! Come along and see, old man.'

Rhona still stood by the window. She wanted John Mowbray to talk to her. He might be neither clear-sighted nor silver-spoken, but he was a link with the old days. Weeks passed now without her hearing her father's name, even from her mother's lips. Nay, that reserve was fast increasing on them both, which must needs grow up between two people whose minds are alike full of a subject they may not talk of frankly. Sometimes Rhona so wearied for the sound of his name that she was constrained to talk of him to little Hilary, who listened dutifully with her big eyes fastened on her friend's face, and an occasional short nod. Her sympathy, as far as it went, was genuine enough—she fully understood how Rhona must miss the father who had loved her so dearly, the rides with him over the moors on his rare holidays, and the waiting on him, and working for him; but poor Hilary could make very little of Rhona's passionate regrets for her lost world—her father's world of thought, and men, and books.

'Did you never want to laugh?' she asked one day, smothering a yawn. 'Would he have minded *very* much?'

'Hilary! no one was ever half so full of fun.'

'Fun?' and Hilary's eyes opened wide. 'Why, I thought he was so very good.'

'Well—good! I should think so, indeed. But why do you suppose the one should prevent the other?'

'Oh, I didn't know. I daresay. I don't know many good people except grandfather—and Captain Geoffrey,' dropping her voice a little.

Rhona smiled rather gravely, and drew up her head. Yes, Geoffrey was good—very good in his silence and rugged endurance. Though his life must be one long and bitter regret for the past; where she failed, he had attained to patience. But to compare Geoffrey, simple and unintellectual, with her father, was impossible. She did not like to hear Hilary coupling the two together as 'good men.' It was hard enough to Rhona to know that her mother had taken Geoffrey into her confidence. How could he be capable of fathoming her father's mind?

Geoffrey's was a beautiful character, beautiful in its submission to the calamity that had blighted his life, in its absence of all bitterness, in the gentleness that made little children run to him, and that feared above all things to give pain, or even to shock the prejudices of another. He had fought his battle with despair most bravely, and those only who remembered him as he used to be, could guess how hard the struggle must have been. But no one ever heard him question the love and the justice that had suffered the blow to fall on him. 'Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord, and shall we not receive evil?' was the spontaneous language of his soul.

He and John Mowbray, though men of such different fibre, were alike happy in their power of unhesitating acquiescence. From him also, as from John Mowbray, had been withheld that crowning gift which Jasper Somerville possessed—a gift to be gained only through the fellowship of suffering—the power of giving help and pity to the doubting and the perplexed.

John Mowbray in his hot zeal would, if he could, have ground doubt and doubters alike to powder under his feet.

Geoffrey would have bidden them for ever hold their peace, lest they should offend 'one of these little ones.'

Rhona long remembered one evening, when opening the door of her mother's room, she found her talking earnestly with her brother. A faded purple manuscript book lay under her hand, and Rhona saw that her tears were falling on to its open page. Presently she saw Geoffrey, who was sitting with his head bent down as usual, and his arms crossed upon the table, stretch out his hand in his blind, groping way, and lay it on those which his sister held clasped over the book. 'Magdalen,' Rhona heard him say, 'shut up that journal of your husband's. Put it away; it ought not to trouble you.'

She looked up at him earnestly. Rhona stole away, softly closing the door behind her. Her uncle's words had startled her, and made her bitterly indignant.

'I think,' Geoffrey went on, 'that you are wrong to let what you have read to me weigh on you. As far, at least, as the public is concerned, your concern is to tell the story of a noble life—is it not?—of a life that seems to you nearly perfect.'

'Yes, indeed, yes,' she said, softly.

'And your only object is to try and help others—to teach and raise them by holding up before their eyes a bright example. Is it not so?'

'Yes,' again faintly spoken.

'Then, I say, put away the record of those days of doubt and of temptation. He was a young man when he kept that journal. Lock it up; it only tells of a passing struggle and distress. It has made you miserable, and it will make others miserable too. And for what object?'

'I thought it might be a duty to publish it with the rest; that it might comfort others to know what even he had to go through once.'

'Oh no.' Geoffrey shuddered. 'Doubt is a horrible thing. Don't give any one the shadow of an excuse for giving way to it.'

'But'—she leant forward and spoke in a whisper—'now that you have heard this, you see that it was a real

part of his life. There was a time when he went through all this'—she took his hand, and laid it on the book.

'If it were so,' he said, gently, 'if he passed through dark hours, why should we expose others to suffer what he suffered? Why raise questions that can only perplex and mislead?'

'He had to face them, Geoffrey.'

'Yes, and he conquered them. Let the rest be. Magdalen, I entreat you not to give the sanction of his great example to the flippant ignorance that is so quick to cavil.'

'He used to pity people; he was very patient with difficulties. And then, Geoffrey, one must be honest—he would say so, I think.'

'Yes, honest before all things; but if you were painting a portrait, would you put in every harsh line you saw—accentuate every defect? You are not bound to describe everything.'

'Yet truth must come first.'

'Of course truth must come first; you can never sacrifice truth. But where the whole truth may prove hurtful, the question arises, Is it not a duty to be silent about a portion of it?'

She made no answer.

'It is a fearful thing to take on you the risk of shaking any one's faith.' He took the book and lifted it in his hand. 'I tell you, Magdalen, I had far rather your husband's life was never written at all, than that by one line in it you should put a stumbling-block, however unwittingly, in the path of a weak seeker after God.'

'Geoffrey!' She snatched the book away from him. 'His life a stumbling-block! He, whom everybody looked up to and almost worshipped—when did he ever do anything but inspire and raise?'

'Yes, as you knew him—as we saw his beautiful after-life. Tell that story, Magdalen, but say nothing about the time of his battle with the powers of darkness—the rash presumption that dared to judge and question, and the faithlessness he must have repented of so bitterly.'

She pushed his hand impatiently away, but he sank his voice: 'Remember, to doubt is disloyalty, and faltering is sin.'

His sister covered her face with her hands. The strong conviction with which he spoke and the decision of his words overawed her; and yet some voice within her seemed to appeal against them, and to say: 'Oh, Geoffrey, blind guide, can you not see how the clear light arose from that very darkness, and how the strength was given through weakness? Shall we not dare to trace out his path, because it passed through gloom and shadow before it came out into the perfect day?'

That conversation saddened instead of helping her, and Rhona, who had seen her tears and become partly cognisant of her trouble, grew more uneasy every day. But it would have seemed to her dishonourable to express her misgivings to John Mowbray.

She wanted him to talk to her about her father on that windy March morning, and as she stood by the window, looking out at the sunshiny garden, her face was full of softness and longing. On the grass below, the crocuses were being tossed and rippled by the wind, into a sea of liquid gold. An indignant, storm-stayed robin redbreast sat on a holly-bush, striving to replume his plump little ruffled person.

John had been silent for so long that Rhona forgot how his last words conveyed to her a reproof, and she was taken by surprise when he came, newspaper in hand, to stand opposite to her in the window, and said abruptly:

'Rhona, you are much too conscious of being cleverer than your mother.'

She looked up at him with parted lips, too much taken aback to think of being angry.

'It may be true,' he went on, tranquilly. 'I don't dispute it. You are cleverer—certainly cleverer; but that need not make you distrust her powers so openly.'

Rhona heard him out, and then turned away in proud silence to walk out of the room. How had John Mowbray dared to bring such an accusation against her? There was not a shadow of truth in it. It was utterly unfounded and cruel. She could never forgive him—never. Any friendship there might have been between them, she said to herself, was at an end henceforward.

In a few minutes she was running down the cedar path, bound for the church, which lay within a stone's throw of the Grange gardens. The great organ there was her refuge and consolation, when the wheels of life drave heavily. She spent hours playing on it, sometimes letting the solemn and healing music float around her like the fluttering of angels' wings, sometimes sending great storms of harmony to roll echoing down the aisle, while the wind, as to-day, thundered a magnificent accompaniment in the roof.

The church clock had just struck twelve. School was over, and she knew that her own especial choir-boy would be waiting to blow for her. Rhona hurried on as if she could escape from the recollection of John Mowbray's speech. But she could not get rid of the recollection. Though you may long be haunted by a voiceless, shadowy misgiving, without being more than faintly conscious of its presence, a thought that has been clothed in words, been given a substance and a shape, and brought to you from outside, can never be ignored again.

There was not one word of truth in what John said! It was cruel to talk of her underrating her mother's powers. It was not worth thinking of a second time. And—even if there had been some sort of foundation for him to build his accusation on, what business was it of his to judge her? She should know better for the future than to think of John Mowbray as a friend.

Rhona opened her music-book, and gave the signal to her little choir-boy.

No one had ever dreamt of her distrusting her mother—no one—except the voices last night in the chimney! Yes, the voices in the chimney, which, after all, were the expressions of her own half-waking thoughts, had spoken much in the same strain as John. She was forced to confess that. And so—was he utterly unjust? Harsh and hard, of course—when was he otherwise?—but utterly unjust? No. He generally managed to have some sort of right on his side—that was one of the provoking things which made his rough home-thrusts so unendurable.

Rhona was playing by this time, and there was a soft

pleading in the music that stole tenderly round her sore and angry heart.

And her father's presence, as often happened when she was in a church, seemed to become a reality. She could almost see his kind, grave smile, and that expression of surprised regret, which any littleness of feeling or token of hurt self-love used to bring across his face.

Had it been her vanity that John had wounded so grievously? Had she been cherishing a consciousness of power—she who had so carefully kept herself in the background all this time? Had she imagined herself equal to a task that was overwhelming to her mother, and secretly wished it had been entrusted to her that she might show the world how bravely she could carry it through?

Poor Rhona! By this time she had to play by heart, she could not see the notes before her, for the tears, still half of anger, half of self-reproach, which dimmed her eyes. And again came the memory of her father's gentleness, in contrast to John's harshness, yet of his stern love of sincerity, his horror of self-seeking, his great humility.

She became conscious presently that she was not alone in the great church. Geoffrey and Hilary had come wandering in to listen, as they often did, when she was playing. He with bent head and folded arms, rapt and abstracted; she, leaning against a pillar, bright-eyed and wide-awake, patiently enduring the music for Geoffrey's sake. There was another person also whom Rhona could see, though Hilary could not. John Mowbray was kneeling on the chancel step, with his head buried in his hands. Rhona's music grew more solemn as she looked. She felt that he had forgotten all about her and her petty indignation—had quite forgotten speaking the words that had wounded her. He was simply absorbed in his consciousness of the great Presence wherein he knelt. John—her father's friend, a rigid, stern-judging, pitiless man, yet one who loved righteousness, and hated iniquity, and spent himself unsparingly for God.

An hour afterwards the music was silent and the organ closed. The little choir-boy had gone gaily off to his long-

delayed dinner in the Grange kitchen; Hilary was in the farmyard with Mr. Heathcote, carefully weighing the claims of three rival pigs to be sent to a forthcoming agricultural show; John Mowbray was setting out on an eight-mile walk to visit a sick parishioner in his uncle's stead, and receiving with entire unconsciousness Rhona's pardoning smile and shake of the hand. Her forgiveness and her anger had alike been wasted on him; she was forced to confess it, as, half amused, half vexed, she walked back along the cedar walk.

After that day she tried for a time to put all thoughts of her mother's work out of her head. Her brother Laurence was at the Grange, and she let him and Hilary take her about whithersoever they listed.

The east wind blew fiercely still; but after all he was a bluff, good-natured sort of a giant when once your mind was made up to meet him in fair fight, taking his buffets in good part. Hilary treated him as an old friend; she and Laurence ran races against him, and defied his ice-bolts merrily.

One day they took Rhona far away across the heath. Two old maiden sisters had lived for many years in a certain lonely dwelling, half farmhouse, half cottage, on the edge of the parish, and it had come to pass that one of them was dead. Hilary, sent by her grandfather to pay the survivor a visit of condolence, set about it by summoning all the people she could find to accompany her. So Rhona went, and Geoffrey, filled with a sincere desire to be neighbourly and consoling, went also, and so did Laurence, whom they fell in with, his gun over his shoulder, on his way back from shooting snipe on the fen. And as they fought their way against the wind through the wiry heather-stems and brambles, they overtook Mrs. Bloomfield fluttering along, and bound on the same errand. *

Out on the wide heath, covered with last year's withered bracken and with gorse bushes that are just beginning to be starred with gold, how cold and bright it is! Here a patch of turnip-field; there a clamorous sheepfold, or a field of freshly-turned, teeming earth, over which the ploughs are

going ; the windmill stands in its furze-hedge enclosure, its wings sweeping round in a majestic circle ; farther off the sails of other windmills are turning rapidly against the sky ; and church steeples and hedgerow trees melt away into the low horizon.

A flock of sheep and lambs are slowly crossing the heath towards their fold : the lambs all thick legs, long tails, and high spirits, bleating, frisking, and uncouth ; the old mothers plodding along, their deep maternal voices chiming in with the innocent treble 'ba-as.'

'They look bored,' avers Hilary, 'if such meek, gray faces have enough expression to be bored. I think they are very sick of the lambs now and then.'

This precious flock of mothers and children is presently charged by Hilary's dog Rover, she flying after him in wild pursuit ; Scamp, the fox terrier, embraces the opportunity to canter gaily off after a scarcely less-to-be-respected brace of partridges that whirr up from the turnip-field.

Hilary screams ; Laurence whistles the dogs back ; Mrs. Bloomfield begins a story which Rhona hears in gusts, for the wind arrests the words upon her lips and whirls them away to the tree-tops of yonder fir plantation. The story concerns a girl who lived in a cottage, who married a man, who had a dog, which worried some sheep that belonged to a farmer. It sounds like the house which Jack built. Rhona loses the thread ; some one, she believes, took to poaching, and some one else emigrated to New South Wales.

Hilary has got Rover back ; Nell thrusts her steady old black head under Geoffrey's hand, and walks beside him with an air of conscious virtue. No hunting game or chasing after sheep for her !

And so—Hilary flying back flushed and breathless, Mrs. Bloomfield still narrating, the dogs barking—they come upon the gaunt farmhouse, standing unsheltered in the teeth of the blast, its upper windows shaded by white curtains that can be seen through the panes shaking and blowing to and fro. Hard by the kitchen-door a fluttering line of many-coloured clothes is hung out to dry, a solitary

ash-tree groans and creaks dismally as it fights the wind with its bare, wide-stretched arms.

Geoffrey tries to call his scattered troop to order—Hilary is scolding Scamp; and Laurence, as he strides along, is singing in a sweet, mellow, careless voice about ‘Three fishers that went sailing out into the west.’

‘Gently, Hilary, child. I say, Laurie, hush, my dear fellow! we are coming near the house of death.’

‘“Three corpses lie out on the shining sand,”’ chants Laurie; but he sinks his voice and unlatches the garden gate.

They are in the house—hurried in by the prying wind, which flings the door wide open, and rushes behind them into the sanded kitchen. There are too many of them altogether, Rhona feels uneasily, and, worst of all, those wretched dogs of Hilary’s have disappeared into some back premises, whence presently issues a clatter as of falling crockery, and a horrid sound of rummaging about.

‘Tis no matter,’ says the hostess; but she looks anxious, though she keeps her seat decorously, and smooths her apron.

‘Lawk, yes; she’s gone—my poor sister is. Went off like a lamb at the last; that she did.’

A crash, a hiss, a smothered bark, and the cat of the house flies out of the shadows, and takes refuge, spitting angrily, on Geoffrey’s knee. Mrs. Marks, poor injured woman, ‘is sure she begs his pardon,’ and Geoffrey apologetically strokes the cat, which forthwith sets up a loud, steady, obtrusive purr.

‘She fares to look very tida in her shroud up in the chamber,’ goes on the bereaved sister in a monotonous voice. ‘I suppose you’d wish to look on her, if so be you’ll rise to the stair.’

Only Mrs. Bloomfield accepts the invitation. The rest make a hurried raid after the dogs; and Scamp is presently dragged out of the pantry by his collar, with his feet scraping along the newly-sanded floor and his eyes starting out of his head. Rover sits down beside his mistress, licking his lips suspiciously and panting with ostentation.

Heavy footsteps pass slowly overhead.

'Well, yes, Mrs. Bloomfield, ter fare lonesome, and will du so for a time, I make no doubt,' and Mrs. Marks reappears in the kitchen. 'She and I ha' lived one along o' the t'other for a matter of tu score year; but, bliss the Lord, her loss is my gain, for I ha' got all her clothing.'

This was a little difficult to meet. Geoffrey, always courteous, murmured something about being happy to hear it, which caused Hilary, leaning over his chair, to break into a sudden little laugh.

'Ah well,' said Mrs. Bloomfield, coming cautiously downstairs, 'here to-day, Mrs. Marks, and gone to-morrow.'

The last word was spoken with a jerk, for Mrs. Bloomfield missed her footing on the steep dark stair, and arrived head foremost in the kitchen. 'Here to-day and gone to-morrow,' she repeated a little severely, recovering her footing.

'By Jove, I thought it was gone to-day,' muttered Laurence, and Hilary laughed again.

Mrs. Marks went back to the elbow chair by the hearth, which as chief mourner it was her place to occupy. 'She was the best cook, bless her! as ever I knu. I'm hanpered to make the funeral cakes without her, Captain Geoffrey, and that's the truth. Her dumplings'—she put the corner of her apron to her eyes, and shook her head. Geoffrey's little sound of sympathy again tried Hilary's gravity to the utmost. 'But there's a textus,' she went on, 'that du console me won'erful,—won'crful that ere du, in my affliction.'

'Ah,' and Geoffrey brightened up, always ready for a text.

'Tis this, sir: "Ate and drink, for to-morrow ye'll die." There's a deal of comfort to be got out of that ere, if you come to look at it the right way. Ate *and* drink,' repeated Mrs. Marks with a sigh, and a stolen glance at the back kitchen. 'Ter fared to come right into my head, as though 'twere put there, as I sat a counting over her stockings, poor old mawther, after she were took, and a plundering over the fire!'

'Plundering!' put in Laurence, in a whisper to Hilary.

‘Pondering—hush.’

‘She meant the stockings,’ in an argumentative tone.

‘Hush! hush!’

‘Ate and drink, to-morrow you’ll die.’ A certain savoury smell from the back regions seemed to give emphasis to the words.

It was an odd scene—the bleak farmhouse kitchen, its door-latches and windows rattling in the wind; the groaning of the ash-tree that darkened the casement; Geoffrey perplexed and disappointed, with the cat purring on his knee; the grim resignation of the mistress of the house, as she sat with hands primly folded to receive the condolences she felt to be her due, her eyes all the time turning furtively towards that inner chamber, whence murmuring voices and a savoury smell betrayed that the funeral baked meats were being furnished forth. And the neighbours now and again stepped in and whispered, and went noiselessly upstairs to look at the dead woman as she lay ‘tida of her shroud,’ waiting in her windy chamber for the burial day.

Hilary and her company had the wind at their backs on their way home. A sudden blinding scud of sleet and hail came swiftly up as they reached the open heath, and swept over their heads, then fled away seawards, and was gone.

The visit left rather a weird impression upon Rhona, but how Hilary and Laurence laughed when they found themselves safely beyond hearing—at the queer ‘textus,’ and the dumplings, at the hissing cat, at Geoffrey striving to be sympathetic under difficulties—at all and everything!

‘Well, well,’ Geoffrey said, indulgently.

Hilary’s eyes were dancing. At the corner of a freshly ploughed field the horses were just turning the plough as they came up. Hilary flew from Geoffrey’s side, cleared the ditch at a bound, and, seizing the plough handles, called on the docile team to ‘gee-up.’ Away they went, the ploughboy, a good-humoured, white-headed alto in the Hithersea choir, grinning as he plodded behind, along the clean-cut, straight furrow that Hilary cut across the field.

‘Hilary, my dear love!’ Mrs. Bloomfield’s hands were lifted up in horror; but the girl shrugged her shoulders in

defiance, as she ran swiftly back, and put Geoffrey's hand on to her shoulder again.

'Turning ploughboy, Hilary,' he said, half reproachfully.

'Well, captain, I cannot help it,' she replied, in an aggrieved tone. 'I had to know about ploughing, or how could I look after grandfather's farm-men? I can't have him going out in the cold at four in the morning to see after them, can I? So last autumn I used to get up by starlight to learn ploughing from Mr. Palmer's bailiff. *You* don't mind, captain, so it does not matter a bit about Mrs. Bloomfield?'

Geoffrey shook his head doubtfully. Rhona was only sorry that there was no sculptor at hand to catch the statuesque pose of the girl's figure, in its elastic grace and strength. And Laurence stood meditating the celebrated cartoon, wherein he afterwards immortalised Hilary at the plough's tail, with wildly fluttering draperies, her dogs leaping round her, and Mrs. Bloomfield lamenting on the edge of the ditch, with her bonnet blown awry, and the umbrella she had raised in solemn warning turned inside out above her head.

And so ended the visit of condolence. Lo, the very next morning the roar and whistle of many weeks past had vanished—instead, a soft, and sweet, and bright silence was spread over everything. Yellow sunshine dreamt on the young grass, the daffodils stood steady on their smooth green stems, in golden battalions, and a cuckoo's faint note rang from the Abbey woods.

In that sweet, short-lived lull many were the expeditions, both by land and by water, wherein Rhona tried to forget her useless watching and her mother's harassed face.

'Could she really be the same person,' she sometimes asked herself, 'who had once drawn back with weary reluctance from the work proposed to her—this haggard and anxious-looking woman poring for hours over her papers with feverish eagerness?'

'Don't you think mother looks ill and overworked?' she asked John Mowbray.

'No! Does she? I had not observed it. But a little

hard work does no one any harm,' answered John, who was himself more sallow and lantern-jawed than ever.

Laurence's consolation was of the 'I told you so' type. 'I warned you. I am not a bit surprised. I knew you, and Mowbray, and the dean would worry her into her grave between you.'

'Mother, you are killing yourself,' he said to her after he had watched her for some time in silence.

She started and looked up hurriedly. 'No, no. Don't try to stop me, Laurie. Don't try to interfere. You cannot understand.'

'It is all Rhona's doing. Can't she help you?'

'Rhona! Oh, don't speak to Rhona, don't tell her. *Promise me.*'

'What is there to tell, except that you are worn to a shadow? She sees that for herself.'

'Bless me, and what *is* it all about, Laurie?' asked poor perplexed Uncle Dick, on whom an uneasy consciousness was dawning of the atmosphere of emotion which surrounded him. He could make nothing of it. Here was Rhona following her mother's every movement with anxious eyes, Laurence looking injured and impatient—Geoffrey, to be sure, was always cheerful; but Magdalen used to be the most tranquil, bright, easy-going creature, and now he really had no notion what she would be at. No wonder! Magdalen Somerville could never have made him understand how it was her placid, colourless past, that was taking its revenge on her.

She had never cared to look far below the surface in her youth. Happiness came to her easily and early, and she accepted it as a matter of course. She never fathomed—perhaps she never cared to fathom—the character of the man she married. As he grew, she was content to let him grow alone. And as long as the children were young, there was nothing to suggest to her that he was capable of receiving and welcoming more sympathy in his life of thought than she had ever tried to give him.

Rhona little guessed the strange retrospective jealousy and pain with which her mother was growing to regard her.

She was chilled at times and almost frightened by the expression in Mrs. Somerville's eyes, if her child came up suddenly to the table where she sat.

'You are ill, mother,' she ventured to say one day, and she laid her cool hand on to the burning one that had been put down hastily to cover the sheet of paper before the desk.

'Ill! no; I am busy, not ill. You used to think I did not work hard enough,' and she laughed. 'Why do you come to interrupt me?'

All the time Rhona saw her eyes glancing uneasily over the papers with which the table was strewn, and which she drew with nervous haste towards her. 'And I cannot help you?'

'No. Why should you think that I need help?'

Who indeed could help her? As she read her husband's letters, weighed his words, and day by day followed out his thoughts, it broke on her for the first time that she had never known him. It was a keen, late agony of regret, and then of jealousy. In vain she now strove to understand him: his mind had reached far out into realms where hers could not follow. In her humility she would have acquiesced in that, if it had not been for the haunting thought that perhaps Rhona would understand. Rhona would know all about it.

She remembered how tranquilly in the old days she had been wont to turn away from some grave discussion that wearied her, leaving little Rhona to listen. How could she have done so? All her life passed before her, as she strained painfully to remember, struggled to meet his mind, wondering with unavailing bitterness over all she had wasted.

But Rhona must know nothing of this. Rhona must never guess what she was discovering painfully day after day. It chafed her to remember the child listening to the grave talk of her father and his friends, with her great eyes seeming to devour their words. No, she should never know how little her mother had cared in those days, how lightly she had turned away to other things.

But at least he was hers now, hers only, hers in death,

and she would share the dear right with no one, nor let a single being guess how far she had fallen short of what might have been hers in life.

So she toiled on, poor woman! with a passionate effort that nobody dreamt of—toiled on till her brain was overwrought and sleep forsook her. Sometimes she fancied that her daughter understood her sore perplexity, and guessed at her vain struggles, and her more vain regrets, and then she turned impatiently from the eyes fixed on her with such wistful inquiry.

There was no one from whom she would seek counsel. The Dean of Morechester, good man, would be quite satisfied if her dates were correct, her incidents well put together, her narrative clear. The blank she felt so vividly would be no blank to him. John Mowbray, it is true, praised what she had written, and, indeed, as far as the mere power of expression went, she was often surprised herself at the ease with which she wrote. But that gave her no pleasure, for all the harder part of her work was untouched as yet. Till now she had dealt simply with the realm of fact, gathering her materials into shape, but the whole world of thought, of feeling, of opinion, would have to be entered on hereafter.

Therefore, it was not so much overwork, as Rhona believed, that brought the strained and hunted expression into her mother's eyes, as the miserable consciousness of being unequal to her enterprise. This overshadowed her like a nightmare. If she hung over her papers until late at night, she only grew dizzy and confused, and more unfit to sleep when, at daybreak on the gray spring mornings, she crept stealthily to bed.

The fire seemed to scorch her brain, and yet the wind, which was still keen and sharp, made her shiver. The sunshine dazzled her; the birds, loud, and shrill, and merry, singing their hearts out over their new nests, rang in her ears discordantly.

And at last the summer came, with its mocking sweetness and calm.

On one of those June mornings when the light comes

her mother, dimly visible in her white dressing-gown, was standing by the bed.

'Rhona,' she was saying, 'I cannot do it. Rhona, I have failed.'

Rhona caught her hand. It burnt like fire, and there was the light of fever glowing in her eyes, when the hastily-kindled candle shone upon her face.

'Rhona,' she said, 'do you hear? I can do no more—I have failed.'

CHAPTER VI

‘I charge thee, fling away ambition.’

THERE was only the study of some tall bulrushes, plummy, beautiful things, and of a few yellow kingcups with their reflections in the water, on the drawing-board which lay on Rhona’s knee. They had been roughly washed in and left.

It was altogether too drowsy and dreamy an afternoon for work, though she had made Hilary bring her in her boat to this out-of-the-way nook of the fen, just that she might sit under a peat-stack and draw the bulrushes—and think. But the brush had dropped out of her idle fingers half an hour ago; and if it were not a bull, she would have said she was too full of thoughts to think—at least, to any purpose.

It was the thirtieth of August. The purple-winged grasshoppers creaked on the burnt grass, the drumming sound of a snipe’s flight came faintly across the fen, a butterfly floated past of pure sunset red, then another, the azure wings of which were lined with silver.

Hilary’s boat was moored to the roots of an old pollard willow on the canal bank. Ned Hawker lay curled up lazily in the bottom, sunburnt, idle, drowsy, as a Venetian gondolier. His mistress sat at Rhona’s feet, her elbows on her knees, and her chin propped on her hands, her favourite attitude—her lap full of forget-me-nots. The sun beat fiercely down on her face, but Hilary scorned to take shelter. Never was the gift of beauty more thrown away than on poor Hilary. In vain did friendly people exhort her to have more pity on her pretty face. She only shrugged her

shoulders, and puckered her forehead into a frown, unmindful of the wrinkles of the future. She was sunburnt, there was no denying it; but somehow few people wished the rich, soft, gipsy tan away. A pink-and-white Hilary would simply not have been Hilary at all.

No, she and Rover shared the sunshine, as they shared much of life together. He sat by her side now, abiding the heat with what fortitude he might, his eyes blinking, his tongue hanging out, panting patiently. A little way off Scamp's hind legs appeared and disappeared out of the sedges, very active and animated, his tail wagging lustily.

It appeared that Hilary was troubled. She looked half cross, half sad, and sat staring across the fen, and whistling gloomily.

'It's a miserable world,' she presently burst out.

'A miserable world—' repeated Rhona, roused abruptly out of a day-dream, and feeling rather dazed.

'And I sometimes wish I was well out of it all.'

'Well out of it, Hilary? What is the matter?'

She did not answer for a few minutes. 'Look here, Rhona, I *love* grandfather, and,' with a sob in her voice, 'grandfather doats on Scamp.'

'Well, you child, you are not jealous of Scamp surely!'

'N—no. Poor Scamp! But grandfather thinks I am not good to Scamp, and he gets displeased with me. Rhona, indeed it is only for the dog's own good. Grandfather gave him too much to eat. The poor dog was getting ill. He was losing his figure. Indeed, I only shut him up in his room for his good.'

'Scamp's room?' Rhona tried to look grave and concerned.

'Of course my room is Scamp's.' Hilary spoke most seriously. 'Well, I have given him my dressing-gown because he likes something soft to lie on; so he was wrapped up in his dressing-gown, and he knew he was to stay quietly in his room until I came to fetch him for his biscuit; but grandfather missed him at dinner. He said, "Where's Scamp? Hilary, you starve the poor thing," and he looked at me——' Hilary's voice gave way. 'And I am sure he

said something to Captain Geoffrey. Rhona! I can't bear them to think I am cruel, but I have the dog's health to consider.'

There are small troubles and great ones. Who is to decide which are great and which are little? Big tears stood on Hilary's sunburnt cheeks, and Rover, becoming aware of them, got up blundering to lick her face, and knocked off her hat with his tail. Good steady Rover, who slept in his kennel in the yard, and ate his dog biscuit thankfully, and never gave trouble, was not half so dear as the prodigal in the reeds yonder, who overate himself and turned a deaf ear when he was called, who snapped at the butcher's boy, and became an apple of discord at the vicarage, by his too attractive manners. Such is the way of the world.

The day was burning hot—even under the peat-stack. A faint red haze hung over the mere; a blaze of sunshine was yellowing the coarse, rush-grown grass; clouds of gauzy insects wheeled and whirled over the sluggish water in the canal.

Rhona half closed her eyes, feeling strangely attuned to the atmosphere of this land 'where it seemed always afternoon.' Occasionally she glanced lazily into a book which lay on her lap half-hidden by her drawing-board. It was a book of poems which had become a good friend and companion of hers during the last summer, though she only read it by stealth nowadays. Uncle Dick, 'no poet,' as he most truly averred, had so tormented her about her liking for it, that Rhona was fain sometimes to take her book, and 'fling him,' like Excalibur, 'far into the middle mere.'

It was rather had on her—the book was anonymous—one day she fished it out of a neglected bookcase at the Grange, and it straightway laid hold of her imagination as no book does, more than once or twice in a lifetime. Some of its lines persisted in ringing in her memory till she half-hated them. Unluckily her uncle came on her one June day, in a hay-field, reading a poem aloud with great emphasis to Hilary, who, overpowered by the perfumy heat and the melody of Rhona's voice, had fallen fast asleep, with her head on a haycock.

He took the book out of the girl's reluctant hand, and burst into a loud laugh when he saw its title.

"‘Thoughts in Rhyme.’ Well, to be sure! ‘Thoughts in Rhyme,’ indeed! Why, Rhona, my dear, can't you find something more amusing to read poor Hilary to sleep with than the verses Adrian Mowbray wrote just after he left Oxford?"

‘Adrian Mowbray's verses!’ Rhona snatched away her book with a blank face. Decidedly the discovery of its authorship was a shock. She had so entered into the spirit of some of the rhymes as to believe that she specially understood their author, and had more sympathy with him in the spirit than she had with many of the people she was acquainted with in the flesh. But when she heard they were Adrian Mowbray's, the charm was broken. Adrian Mowbray—the Squire of Wildenhall, Olga's lover. John's brother, the brilliant, sceptical young scholar her father had wished to know—was a real personage, whom very likely she might meet to-morrow. It was decidedly disenchanting. She wished he had written anything rather than that one book. Few people now knew of its existence. Adrian Mowbray hated the sight of its modest brown cover, and of the mock cynical motto from the ‘Rejected Addresses’ he had put on its title-page: ‘*Thinking is but an idle waste of thought.*’ But for all that it was a genuine, living, generous little book, though its author long ago had outlived and repented it. He cordially concurred in his motto as far as his youthful verses were concerned.

Rhona was young herself, and there were many lines wherein her thoughts answered as in a mirror to the thoughts of the writer. Of course, critics—cold, elderly critics—might call it a crude book, full of the exaggerated melancholy of youth, of its vehemence, of its overstrained indignation against injustice and wrongdoing. Of course, the shadows of the great poets had fallen across each page. Here was a description of Wildenhall, which was doubtless a sort of copy of Lord Byron's ‘Dream.’ Call it a clever imitation if you will, Rhona found in it a power, a harmony, a vague pathos that stirred her heart. On him, as later on herself, the genius of the place had laid

strong hold ; he had felt its spell—the great gray house stained with golden and white lichen, the mournful pleasaunce, the water, the winds, the low horizon, and the sunsets.

Rhona could never help thinking about Adrian Mowbray with keen curiosity. He must be so unlike his brother, and then his present writings were utterly different from the earlier ones, and his story was so melancholy. There was no one to enlighten her curiosity. Hilary never could describe any one, and Uncle Dick's verdict was soon given. The squire was a clever fellow—safe to be Prime Minister, if he cared about it ; but a benighted Londoner all the same, who neglected the thinning of his woods, and chose to pass whole summer days boxed up in some House of Commons Committee-room or another.

'Never clapped eyes on the squire?' said to Rhona a gossipy old person who used to keep Lady Gertrude Mowbray's dame school in more primitive days. 'Lawk ! you'll soon know him when you happen of him, that you will, if 'tis only by his high statue and his raving hair.'

'Raving hair !' It was difficult to picture John's brother an erratic genius with wildly floating locks.

'Yes, sure ; he farc a won'erful dark-skinned gentleman—like a 'Talian or an Esquimaux—the squire du, and his hair, if you'll credit of me, black as the raving's wing.'

Well, to-night, being the thirtieth of August, Adrian Mowbray was coming down to the Abbey to be ready for the partridges on Monday. Luckily, thought Rhona, closing the brown book, he would never know how many of his verses were stored up in her memory, almost against her will.

John Mowbray had come to Wildenhall to meet his brother. When Rhona returned with Hilary from their afternoon under the peat-stack, she found him in the Grange garden, standing near her mother's basket-chair.

Rhona came forward with a quick impulse of protection. John had not seen Mrs. Somerville since the beginning of her illness, and he was watching her now, the girl imagined, critically and carefully, in order to judge, after his cold-blooded fashion, whether she was fit for work.

'Mother is better—a great deal better,' she said, defiantly, laying her hand on her mother's shoulder; 'but she needs great care.'

To do him justice, John had been talking to her gently enough: he was shocked at the change in her. Every one was gentle with Mrs. Somerville now. She was a great deal better, as Rhona said, but something feeble, sweet, almost childlike, lingered in her looks and ways. Rhona loved her passionately in her softness and tender dependence.

The time before her illness seemed to have passed from her memory altogether. Sometimes her daughter doubted whether its feverish struggle and anxiety were more to her than a dream, and she dreaded nothing more than an awakening. Months had passed since that sad June morning that Rhona could never forget. The ink had long ago dried in the inkstand, and rusted the unused pens.

Once only, the first time they brought her into her sunny sitting-room, had Rhona seen her eyes turn with a faint look of curiosity and perplexity towards the piles of manuscripts on her writing-table. A spot of colour rose in her pale cheek. She put out her hand and gently pushed the nearest packet across the table towards her daughter. Rhona gathered it up, and, bundling all the other papers together, locked them hastily away. She, too, was changed. By her mother's sick-bed she had learnt many lessons.

Almost with dismay she heard of John Mowbray's coming. It was as if, after a truce, the stress and fret of the battle were all about to begin again, when moving a few steps aside from her mother's chair, he said to her in his quiet voice, 'I should be glad to speak to you some time to-morrow.'

'To-morrow—oh!' and she escaped to her uncle's side. He and Reynolds had been squabbling over a sick rose-tree. Rhona was relieved when he put his hand on her arm and turned with them towards the house. 'Well, John, and who has your brother got up at Wildenhall?'

'Only the Grantleys, Keith and Lady Helen; but I believe some people are coming on Monday for the shooting.'

‘The Grantleys? Oh, ah! nice woman, Lady Helen. And are you going to give us a sermon to-morrow, John?’

‘Yes,’ gravely, ‘my uncle wishes it.’

‘So much the better for us, eh, Rhona? Old Bloomfield is all very well, but we are none the worse for some one to stir us up for once in a way; and I hope Adrian means to come to church and set us a good example, now he has made up his mind to come home. It does harm in the parish when he stays away.—Going? Tell Keith Grantley I have a sciadopitys to show him that will make him green with jealousy. He says all his are dead. What is a sciadopitys?’ and Mr. Heathcote’s voice rose as he followed his companion. ‘Is it a tree, do you say? Of course it is. A bird? Nonsense, my dear fellow. A bird, indeed! Where can you have lived? Why, John, you will be the death of me. There is even Rhona laughing at you, and she could not tell a cryptomeria from a retinospora to save her life. My goodness me! I must tell Reynolds that; it will be a joke for him. Well, good evening to you. Mind you tell Grantley to come and see my bird. I would give sixpence to see Grantley’s face.’

‘There, there,’ as he came back from seeing his visitor out of the porch, ‘few trees, or birds either, does he see, shut up from one year’s end to another in the back slums. It’s a shame to laugh at him—bird or bush, it’s all aver-de-poy with him, as Lord Thetford’s keeper used to say. “Aver-de-poy,” Rhona—avoiirdupois, you know.’ (Uncle Dick always explained his Norfolk stories.) “‘It’s all aver-de-poy,” says he, when Thetford wanted to know which covert to shoot first. Sciadopitys—a rum bird; but I hope he will tell Keith Grantley.’

Keith Grantley! the name sounded strange, almost ghostly, in Rhona’s ears. It seemed to belong to the past, and to be taken from the old story of Adrian and Olga. To hear it spoken in common parlance had an odd effect. Rhona wondered whether Olga was quite forgotten. Did all sorrow fade in the fierce light of time? She could hardly understand the two men, Adrian and Keith Grantley, coming to Wildendall together, and looking out at the fatal

mere from those great square windows. With all her curiosity to see the hero of the tragedy which he seemed to have forgotten, Rhona almost wished he had kept away. He must have altered very much; perhaps it would be better to have known him only in the days of the brown book.

Later in the evening she and Hilary were walking towards the church. Rhona often played the organ on Sundays, and she wanted to look over a chant book that she had left there before the service the next morning. It was a moonlight night, but very dark under the trees. The shadow of the church spire lay black across the grass, which was silvered with dew. The south door stood half open. 'They have forgotten to lock up the church,' whispered Hilary, who carried the massive key, as she pushed the door farther back.

Silence fell on them both as the shadowy length of nave and choir lay stretched in front of them; the roof soaring into gloom, the moonlight that poured through each south window falling like a great colourless stain on to the pavement.

The stillness was intense. They passed quickly up the aisle half frightened by the sound of their own footsteps; but as they reached the chancel step, Hilary suddenly grasped her companion's arm. 'There is some one in the church,' she whispered. 'See yonder in the Mowbray Chapel!'

The moonlight was streaming across Olga's tomb, throwing out the fair marble figure into white distinctness against the dark background. Beyond it a tall shadow could dimly be distinguished, which moved away as the footsteps and Hilary's whisper broke the silence.

The two girls stood watching. Presently the figure of a man came into the moonlight, and passed slowly down the aisle, crossing the church to the south door.

Hilary drew a long breath. 'It was Adrian Mowbray,' she said, in a low voice.

Rhona sat in her place at the organ on the following morning. The bells were ringing. People came quietly into church by twos and threes. Heavy footsteps

sounded along the aisle—the school-children clattered in. Hilary, a little less picturesque than usual in her Sunday clothes, and absorbed in her care of ‘grandfather,’ whom she drove over from Hithersea in an old-fashioned dogcart, came to sit by Rhona with a grave face, and eyes fastened on the vestry door. The sun poured streams of jewelled light through the painted windows. It was an ordinary, hot, peaceful, summer Sunday morning. Rhona could have given no good reason for the quiver of excitement that was making her hands cold, and sending a thrill all over her. ‘It was very unaccountable,’ she said to herself. She glanced at the rows of faces in the aisle—some apathetic, some thoughtful, some weary, most of them expressive of a patient indifference. It was only she who trembled, without half knowing why.

Certainly for one thing, a conversation with John Mowbray was hanging over her head, and she guessed that what he said would break up the lull of feeling the last few months had brought. Then again the momentary glimpse of his brother Adrian in the dark church last night had touched her imagination. Clearly he had not forgotten Olga—and Rhona kept picturing what he must feel when in the broad daylight his eyes rested on the exquisite image of his dead love’s face.

John Mowbray was to take part in this morning’s service. The last time she had heard him preach was in Morechester Cathedral—her father’s funeral sermon; his very voice was laden with memories.

Probably most people endowed with strong sympathies know the odd quickening of every power that had come to Rhona—as if for the moment she was gifted with the knowledge of what others felt, could divine their thoughts, and be moved by their emotion.

The bells stopped, the vestry door was opening. John Mowbray appeared, and his uncle’s white head was seen behind him. Then Rhona began to play, and the rich quieting music grew under her hands, and rolled along the church. It ceased; the last chord was slow in dying away, and she heard John Mowbray’s well-known voice.

The second lesson was half over before she glanced at the seat in front of the Mowbray Chapel; but she knew, though she had not seen any one come in, that, for the first time since she had been at Wildenhall, it was occupied.

A lady sat there with a bright, lovable, sunshiny face; an honest-looking, strongly-built, rather handsome man beside her; and in the farther corner, leaning back with his arms folded, was Adrian Mowbray. There could be no question as to who he was. At the first glance the likeness to his brother was curiously strong.

It was one of those likenesses that are evident to all strangers, but that are constantly being lost and found again, and denied or affirmed, by relations and near friends. Both were tall and dark men, having penetrating eyes and marked eyebrows; but the character and expression of the two faces were thoroughly dissimilar.

Many stolen looks were directed towards those three people, for the squire had been absent for a long time, and even when at home he did not often appear in church. Probably, however, no one but Rhona found it strange to see him and Sir Keith Grantley standing side by side, close to the spot where Olga lay sleeping, unmoved alike by the presence of husband or lover.

Rhona's thoughts passed on to her father's strong interest in the man before her—to the strong, wise friendship which might have wrought him so much good—to John's great wish to bring them together. Both prayers and lessons seemed to bear a new significance to-day. Passage after passage touched her thought with singular appropriateness. She believed John Mowbray's thoughts met and crossed hers, for she knew how fervently and sincerely he was praying for his brother, and—instinctively—how unmoved that brother was.

And when the sermon began, and the text was given out in John's composed accents, Rhona felt as if she had been sure beforehand what it would be. It was so like him to choose the words, 'Blessed are those which have not seen and yet have believed,' so like him in his honesty,

and perhaps in his unwisdom. It was not thus that her father would have dealt with such an auditor.

Rhona could not avoid one glance at Mr. Mowbray. His eyes were raised in grave attention to his brother's face. She felt, rather than saw, the faint tinge of amusement under the serious look, because John was preaching at him.

Rhona listened to every word of that sermon with the ears of another person, feeling preternaturally critical, impatient, responsible. All the while she was longing to alter a sentence, to strengthen an argument, to suppress this passage, to cut short that quotation; above all, with vain and ardent longing, wishing that her father was standing in the preacher's place.

She thought the uncompromising, earnest, dogmatic little discourse would never come to an end. When at last it was over—and counting by minutes it was far from being a long sermon—she was surprised to find herself trembling with eagerness from head to foot.

The congregation had pretty nearly dispersed before she and Hilary left the church. Sir Keith Grantley had just driven his wife in a pony-carriage away from the lych gate, and Mr. Mowbray was still standing near it under the big yew-tree, talking to Uncle Dick, and waiting for his uncle and his brother. Rhona and Hilary thought to cross the grass unheeded, and escape into the cedar walk, but Uncle Dick espied them the moment they emerged into the sunshine, from under the church porch.

'Here, Adrian,' he called, cheerfully, 'here comes my niece, Rhona Somerville—let me introduce you—who has been reading your old poems, "Thoughts in Rhyme," I can't tell how many times over——'

Mr. Mowbray was shaking hands with Geoffrey.

'Reading them over and over, no one knows what number of times, I tell you. Come now, what do you say to that?'

'Only that I pity Miss Somerville very sincerely,' and Mr. Mowbray took off his hat. 'Well, Hilary, are you coming out to show us where to find the most partridges on Tuesday?'

'No,' with an abrupt swing away from him, for staunch little Hilary saw how discomfited her friend was. She was rather in the dark as to the reason, but she perceived Mr. Heathcote to be in his most unmanageable mood, and she heard Adrian's careless answer. As for Rhona, in her highly wrought condition she felt as if a bucket of cold water had been flung in her face—outwardly she looked only shy and proud.

'Uncle Dick!' she laid her hand on his arm, and spoke in an undertone, 'dear Uncle Dick!'

She might as well have talked to the wind.

'She fished the book out of my library one fine day, with the leaves uncut—as likely as not—the leaves uncut, eh, Adrian?—and you ought to have been there to see how it caught her fancy.'

'It was not a very friendly act of yours, I must say, to inflict that old rubbish upon any one.'

'Bless you! she didn't think it rubbish—trust her! Why, she has half the lines by heart at this moment, I believe.'

He laughed.

'Miss Somerville is too indulgent.' Then he turned back to Hilary: 'What can the two parsons be doing shut up in the vestry all this time, Hilary?'

'I daresay grandfather has lost his spectacles,' she answered, still rather cross on her friend's behalf.

'Well, Rhona, my dear,' and Uncle Dick, provokingly unconscious, came gaily after her along the cedar walk, 'and how did you like your favourite poet?'

But Rhona's feeling was too deep for words. She only looked at him, 'more in sorrow than in anger.'

Meanwhile Mr. Mowbray walked home alone, and was presently apologising to his two guests for being late for luncheon.

'Helen was saying what a capital sermon John gave us,' said Sir Keith Grantley.

'Capital!' and he surveyed the table critically.

'And what a beautiful organ you have!' added Lady Helen.

'Beautifully played, I thought, wasn't it?'

'Yes, who was she? I wanted to ask you. Keith says she has a lovely profile.'

'Oh, Keith says she has a lovely profile, does he?'

'Long eyelashes, and all that,' put in Keith, without looking up from his game pie.

'Just so.'

'And who is she? Not Mrs. Bloomfield's daughter, surely!'

'No, make your mind easy, not Mrs. Bloomfield's daughter. She has not got one, to the best of my knowledge and belief.'

'Who is she, then?'

'She is the daughter of a much more distinguished man than old Bloomfield. My friend, Mr. Heathcote, is her uncle.'

'Oh, is she a niece of dear old Neighbour's?' asked Keith.

'To be sure—old Dick's niece.'

For Neighbour Heathcote, or oftener Neighbour Dick, had been from his boyhood the name by which all the Mowbrays called him.

'But, meanwhile, who is the distinguished man?'

'Jasper Somerville.'

'Jasper Somerville! the great Somerville—the author? You don't say so? Oh, then I hope I shall see her. What is she like? I heard him preach once, and I love his books. Is she worthy of him? Do you know her well?'

'I made her acquaintance after church to-day. I have known her,' looking at his watch, 'one hour and seventeen minutes. But then I was walking home a great part of that time.'

'Still, you might just tell me what she is like.'

Keith says she has long eyelashes.'

'And what do you say?'

'I say she played that soft thing—Bach's, wasn't it?—after the prayers, you know, uncommonly well.'

'Surely she spoke to you, did not she?'

Mr. Mowbray pondered. 'Upon my word, I don't believe she did.'

'Then you couldn't have spoken to her—how rude!'

'Not at all. I spoke to her, but I rather think she was talking to her uncle. By the way, I heard her speaking to Geoffrey Heathcote, the blind man, and I noticed her voice—a very pretty, soft one. There's for you, Lady Helen.'

'Oh, then, I hope she will come here.'

'And play on the organ in the hall?'

'And talk in her soft voice,' suggested Keith.

'And talk in her soft voice,' assented Adrian.

'And tell me about her father,' added Lady Helen.

'Do you think I might talk to her about him?'

'My brother John was his curate—he can tell you all about him.'

'Oh, so he can. I shall never forget that sermon of his as long as I live!'

'John half worshipped him, I believe,' and Adrian walked to the window.

'But, Lady Helen, now I come to think of it, you will see Miss Somerville to-morrow—that is, if you vouchsafe to patronise us. The parish "frolic," as we call it here—the school feast—comes off to-morrow afternoon. What luck for you, Keith, to be let in for the red-letter day in our calendar!'

Mr. Mowbray might talk with mild irony about the village 'frolic,' every one else in Wildenhall was studying the clouds that Sunday evening, and prophesying about the weather.

Mrs. Bloomfield had her head out of window with the first streak of daylight on Monday, craning her neck to eastward, to see if the dawn opened its sleepy gray eyes with a good-natured promise of a fine day. Nothing could be more hopeful than the luminous haze that hung over the mere, and was rolling away in bright transparent folds before the sun.

'A gaudy morning,' pronounced Reynolds, the Grange gardener, foremost amongst the weatherwise, and an invariable prophet of evil. 'I don't like the looks o' such as he. Yes,

yes, the glass fare high enough ; but I don't hold much with them there glasses, they don't keep the wet away at harvest time. I don't see as how they tell on the weather much. Let them fall as low as they will, down comes the rain just the same. "'Tis a warning, Reynolds, that where 'tis," Mr. Heathcote he observe to me. "A warning, sir!" I sa' to him. "I call that a tempting of Providence, that's what I call it ; when we have warning enough in the clouds," I sa'. "What do we want with them there glasses?" I sa'.—The pig, Mrs. Bloomfield? you want to see the pig we are going to give to be run arter at the frolic. Here he be—and 'tis a shame to waste the likes o' he on a lot o' ongain lads, that will be hampered to feed of him proper. He would ha' fattened butiful, he would, if he had been spared us, and that's the treuth.'

'Like the old woman's pig,' said Mr. Heathcote, sauntering up with Hilary, 'that the parson went to see, Mrs. Bloomfield. You know my story, don't you? Thetford told it me. "Your pig looks about ready to be killed," says the parson. "Lawk, sir," says she, "I wish I were half as fit to die as he is, bless him."''

Mrs. Bloomfield looked shocked, and only Hilary laughed.

'The pig had honourable mention at the Abbey also.'

'Lady Helen, I don't apologise to you,' said Mr. Mowbray, as they stood after breakfast on the steps leading down to the plesauce. 'I know you don't mind how many greased poles you climb, or how many soapy-tailed pigs you run after ; but I do condole with Keith. Didn't I hear of some festive scene at Grantley the other day? You have undergone a "frolic" already this year, haven't you?'

'Three,' grimly responded Keith.

'Ah, I thought so. One would not miss this sort of thing for worlds.—Here is my brother John thirsting for the fray.'

John was standing on the steps near at hand, and looked round gravely on hearing his name. He had never been known to shirk work in his life, and was steadfastly minded to help his fellow-clergy, it being, in his eyes, as simple a piece of duty to swing the children, and tie them up in sacks

for races, as to teach them their catechism. He stood now with the limp linen body of a doll wrapped in silver paper—a benefaction of Lady Helen’s—grasped absently in his hands, its waxen legs hanging out of the wrapper, and its vacant smiling face staring into his.

‘So you won’t go after the partridges by yourself, Keith?’

‘Thanks, I’ll wait for you.’

‘Well, it might be hard lines on old Ashby, to take him out to-day. His son is head chorister, or best boy, or pupil teacher, I forget which, and we shall crown him with laurel after tea. If you want a game of lawn-tennis before luncheon, Lady Helen, I’m your man, but keep a vestige of energy for the soapy pig, please.’

In his quiet, high-and-mighty way, the squire was not above caring a good deal to be friendly and popular with his people, and he was quite prepared to sacrifice his day’s shooting to the exigencies of the occasion.

And the afternoon turned out brilliantly lovely, Reynolds and his weather-glass notwithstanding. A sun that was worthy of Midsummer Day blazed over the green sward in the park, where the big tent was pitched. The flags stirred lazily in the cool breeze that blew gently from the mere. A warm fragrance of tea and musk, peppermint and gingerbread, floated in the air. The archdeacon and Hilary brought their flock from Hithersea by water; and to watch the lumbering boats coming up along the mere, garlanded with flowers and streamers, and laden with shouting children, was the prettiest sight of the day. Hilary was in her glory—the first to spring on shore, her eyes sparkling, her hat hanging over her arm, and her hair in glorious disarray, tumbling in a glittering blonde mass on to her shoulders. Who cared that her cotton frock was crumpled, and that one glove had got drowned in the mere as they came along? Not she—her whole soul was centred in her school-children.

So was good Mrs. Bloomfield’s, though she found a moment to mourn over Hilary’s gloveless and hatless condition. But the parish fife-and-drum band was marching gaily up. Never had it played so loud before, nor, perhaps, quite so much out of tune; but that was the excitement,

everybody said, and perfectly natural. At all events, as Mrs. Collins, the big drum's mother, proudly averred, 'You could pick the te-une out right plain from among all them there notes, that you could,' and nobody had a doubt about the air when the band struck up 'See the conquering hero comes,' as Mr. Mowbray drove Lady Helen Grantley on to the ground in a pony-carriage. Tea was going on in the large tent. Hilary was flying hither and thither, spilling rivers of scalding tea from the mighty cans she carried. Mrs. Bloomfield, talking all the time, bore round the milk jugs, and Rhona toiled after them under pyramids of cake, and bread and jam, with a sort of wistful gravity on her face.

A little later she sat scoring for a very juvenile cricket match, under some spreading lime-trees, the shadows of which made delicious islands of darkness on the sunlit grass.

The small cricketers batted and shouted, a run being made once in about five minutes, and Rhona looked on placidly from her basket-chair, thankful for the quiet and coolness after the crowded tent. The little nook of solitude was very pleasant. Rhona felt melancholy. All day she had been taking herself to task for her want of sympathy with the merry children and their busy elders. She knew it was foolish, but strive as she would, she could not shake off the remembrance of yesterday's misadventure, and Uncle Dick's unlucky announcements respecting the book of verses. She did not at all wish to meet Mr. Mowbray again. How he hated having the existence of his old poems forced upon his memory, and how less than little he cared whether she admired them or not! The thought nettled her, she wished she had never been so ill-advised as to rummage that tiresome brown book out of its dark corner in the bookcase—or rather she wished that its author had in common honesty put his name on the title-page. She would have taken good care that Uncle Dick knew nothing of her liking for it in that case. For she had admired the poems—that was the provoking thing. There was no denying it, and to be despised by a poet for overrating his own workmanship was particularly stinging. Again and again a little burning flush tingled up

into Rhona's cheeks, as she recalled her visionary friendship with the unknown writer, the sympathy she had imagined to exist between herself and him, and then contrasted it all with Adrian Mowbray's careless words, and manner of ill-disguised impatience. He had been almost rude, she said to herself, beating indignant time with her foot to the music of 'See the conquering hero' as it floated to her.

She was not a bit satisfied with herself either. Here she was, occupied only with her own petty grievances. How unlike Hilary, whose ringing laugh reached her every now and then, and whose delight in the children's pleasure was untroubled by a thought of what any one might be thinking of her; or Mrs. Bloomfield bustling to and fro in the sun, busy, happy, and loquacious; or Lady Helen Grantley, who seemed all in a moment to be at home among the children, and to be helping on the games as blithely as Hilary herself.

Uncle Dick, blissfully unconscious of his yesterday's misdeeds, was dancing round the mulberry bush with the infant school, singing in a stentorian voice, and busily washing his face, 'on a cold frosty morning.'

Geoffrey, a cluster of children hanging to his coat and stick, was spinning sailors' yarns for the benefit of a parcel of big boys, who listened in bashful but open-mouthed glee, poking one another in the side, and exploding with hoarse laughter at every joke. John Mowbray, in another part of the field, was conscientiously handicapping a hurdle race.

'What dear good people they all are!' thought Rhona, remorsefully, while she, 'far from the madding crowd,' with her idle scoring pencil and her white draperies, presented a disgraceful, though a pretty picture, of cool repose.

Adrian Mowbray, treading noiselessly over the mossy turf, came up suddenly behind her.

'What a pretty sight this is!' he began, directly he had greeted her; and he took possession of a neighbouring basket-chair, and surveyed the scene benevolently.

Rhona chose to think that if he had said, 'What a terrible bore!' it would have been nearer the mark.

'Of course, that is the sort of thing he feels bound to

say to me,' she said to herself, with a perverse spark of wounded vanity.

She bestowed on him a fragment of a grave smile, and zealously scored a 'bye-run' which had just been achieved. She was not going to help him to play 'conquering hero' or 'grand seigneur.'

But he was not to be daunted.

'We are lucky in our weather, too,' he went on, leaning lazily back in his wicker chair to look up into the deep blue of the sky. 'What would have become of us if it had rained, I am at a loss to imagine.'

'Mrs. Bloomfield would have managed with the big tent,' said Rhona, resenting and ignoring the 'us.' What would it have mattered to him if it had rained cats and dogs?

'Ah yes, to be sure, Mrs. Bloomfield—she is invaluable, so full of resource; but we are unusually lucky with our helpers. Lady Helen is a host in herself; and Hilary—just look at Hilary. Hallo! what is up with her now?' as they saw her leave Lady Helen and race across the grass with horror depicted on her face. 'What's wrong, Hilary?' and he got up and laid hold of her as she passed near.

'The poultry yard!' gasped Hilary; 'the chickens! I brought my ferrets—I thought the boys would like to get a rabbit—and they have got out of their bag, and there are a lot of young ducks about. Don't stop me!' and on she flew.

Mr. Mowbray sank back in his chair and laughed.

'That is an original child if ever there was one. Fancy bringing ferrets to a school feast!—I hope you are very kind to her,' he added, suddenly turning his penetrating eyes on to Rhona's face.

She looked up surprised.

'I am very fond of her.'

'That's well; I am glad to hear it; she wants good friends, poor little body!'

'Well, Mowbray!' and Mr. Heathcote walked up fanning himself with a dilapidated straw hat; 'torn yourself away from the Blue-books to come and give us a lift, have you?

So much the better. Bless me, it's as hot as the dog days.' The mulberry bush and the cold frosty morning seemed to have been too much for Uncle Dick. 'Pretty subject, this, for a poem!' with a would-be arch glance at Rhona.

'They all look jolly enough,' he responded, getting up from his lowly seat after the slow fashion of very tall men. 'One rather grudges such a day as this from the partridges oneself.'

'Ay, ay. You should bring us home a wife to represent you on this sort of occasion.' ('There goes Uncle Dick again,' thought Rhona, 'forgetting all about Olga.') 'Such an one as Lady Helen there, now. She gets on with the children like a house on fire.'

'Ah!' the squire answered, lazily, 'find me another Lady Helen, and there's no saying what I may do.'

'There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, my dear fellow.'

'I don't come across them then. Lady Helen is one in a thousand. Shall we go and see how many ducklings Hilary's ferrets have devoured, Miss Somerville?'

Rhona got up perforce and walked unwillingly beside him.

'Mrs. Bloomfield, I must wish you joy of your fine day,' he said, as they passed her in high conclave with a knot of farmers' wives.

'Yes, Mr. Mowbray, you may indeed; I had my doubts a day or two ago. When Mr. Heathcote dropped into mine on Saturday, and said the glass was falling, I could have sat down and cried. But it got up again on Sunday, though I'm not sure I hold with these new-fangled anaroyds and prophecies more than old Reynolds does—the gardener at the Grange, you know—as worthy an old soul as ever lived. "He don't like having the Americans sending him over their old storms when they have done with them," he says.—Esau Clerk, you bad boy, don't you go meddling with little girl Baker's plum bun!' And Mrs. Bloomfield bustled off.

'How good and hearty she is!' thought Rhona, 'and how nice of her to be honestly wrapped up in its all going

off well! *She* is not displeased with Mr. Mowbray for saying it was a fine day. Why should I mind his talking down to my level too?’

And the afternoon wore away, and the prizes were given. The pig with the soapy tail was lost and won, and there were speeches to wind up with. The archdeacon said his few simple words; and Mr. Heathcote added a great deal of good advice; and finally, Adrian Mowbray came to the front, and made a little speech, so kindly and cheery, as to be the very gem and model of all little speeches of the sort.

The children laughed heartily; even the careworn faces of their elders were lighted up with smiles. It was one of those little speeches that win hearts without any seeming effort—just a good-natured word or two, and a joke that hit the fancy of the audience. Then when the merriment was at its height, he ended with an abrupt change of tone, and a few quietly pathetic words of veiled allusion to some one loved and lost, to whom he owed the tie that bound him to Wildenhall, and to a common sorrow that had fallen alike over his past and theirs.

The cheers rang out afresh, but some of the women were crying. Ashby, the old gamekeeper, who had taught Ralph Mowbray to shoot, sobbed outright. The stolid faces of one or two of the men were quaint in their perplexity. Unaccustomed to rapid transitions of feeling, and checked in the middle of their hearty laughter, they did not know what to make of this queer unwonted feeling that clutched at their throats and made their eyes water. Only the school-children, to whom the past was a blank, went on shouting with a wild exultation in the clamour raised by their own voices.

Rhona was taken by surprise. Her eyes had filled with unexpected tears. ‘How very strange,’ she said rather indignantly to John Mowbray, by whose side she chanced to be standing. ‘How could he! I thought he was the last man in the world to make a personal allusion like that. I can’t understand it. I thought he was so reserved.’

‘He is an orator born,’ John answered. ‘The instinct to say the telling thing, cost what it may, is too strong for

him. He can't help himself. I daresay by this time he is sorry for having said it. But he could do anything he pleased with the people just now. Listen !'

The cheering was louder than ever, and taken up again and again. John Mowbray sighed. 'What a power it is— if one only had it. What a lever to be used for winning people over to the right side !'

'Do you mean it was all for effect—that he did not mean what he said ?' and Rhona waxed still more indignant.

'Oh no !' John answered, absently, 'he meant it all, sure enough. No fear of that, poor fellow !'

The 'frolic' was over, and the sun was sinking with inexorable swiftness. Slowly and reluctantly the people began to disperse over the grass that was getting silvery with dew. The chill of an early autumn evening crept into the air ; but the west was a sheet of ruddy gold, and the mere caught to its heart reflections from the glowing clouds.

Rhona stood watching the boats, that carried home the Hithersea school-children, push off from the shore. 'Good-night,' called Hilary.

'Good-night,' echoed the voices of all Wildenhall, gathered on the bank.

The band in the leading boat began to play an evening hymn ; and, as boat after boat glided away, the singing voices of the children came clear and soft across the darkening water. John Mowbray took off his hat, and Adrian, who had come to see his uncle off, stood silently by his brother with his arms folded.

The last golden rays shot upwards from the clouds.

'The sun is sinking fast—the daylight dies'—the voices were fading away in the distance, and the red disc dipped beneath the mere.

'What a magnificent spectacle !'

Rhona started, for John's voice roused her out of a dream. 'What a lesson of peace that glorious sky and departed sun should speak to our worldly, ambitious, feverish spirits !'

His brother turned round with a short laugh. 'Speak for yourself, John ; Miss Somerville and I entirely decline to be considered feverish or worldly.'

'Or ambitious !' significantly.

'Or ambitious, in the smallest degree.'

'You must have altered strangely then since the old days.'

'Most boys are ambitious,' carelessly answered Adrian, 'it is one of the weaknesses of youth. We get over our little ambitions as life goes on—except, perhaps, the modest one of being allowed to go our own way in peace.'

'Yet it seems to me——' began John, but he was interrupted.

'Do yeou want a poff?' said a sudden voice behind them.

John and Rhona turned round. Adrian glanced over his shoulder at the speaker, a short, stout, young man with a fierce red beard.

'Do yeou want a poff?' he repeated with immense emphasis on the second and last word.

'I beg your pardon. Are you speaking to me?'

'Yes.'

'What are you talking about, then?'

'A poff! Will you have me poff this frolic of yours in the newspaper?'

'Will I have you puff this frolic?' repeated Adrian. 'Certainly, if it's any pleasure to you—it's all one to me. Do you write for the *Herald* ?'

'Chance times,' said the short youth, rather abashed.

'Send the puff to the *Herald* by all means—I don't want to stand in your way. I daresay you wrote it over night, eh? There, John,' he added, turning back to his brother, as the young journalist walked sheepishly away, 'you have the whole question in a nutshell. What is ambition but wishing to be puffed? I have outlived puffs, therefore I am not ambitious.'

Rhona looked at him. She could understand his impulse to parry his brother's awkward home-thrusts, but his obvious unreality was just as provoking in another way.

Not ambitious?

It began to rain after the twilight fell, and everybody had gone home; so old Reynolds was right after all. The

wind got up, and later in the evening it was tossing branches about, and driving clouds, and rattling raindrops against windows, as if there were no such things as peaceful sunsets in the world.

Not ambitious?

Adrian Mowbray sat alone by his fireside that night. It was chilly, and a log or two crackled on the hearth. The autumn storm raved outside. Within there was drowsy warmth and softly-tinted lamplight. He sat leaning forward, a cigar between his lips, his head resting on his hand, the fire-gleams, as they rose and fell, playing over his face and showing its immovable gravity. It was a picture of quiet and solitary comfort. Yet as he sat there, impassive as were his features, he was a man wrestling with the throes of a fierce ambition, writhing under the sting of more than one biting disappointment, dissatisfied and restless—a man who craved madly for success, who dreamed dreams of fame, some of them such selfish, low, grovelling dreams that the dreaming self would have been ashamed to hint at them to the waking self—dreams of power, and praise, and place, the coarse, palpable, ‘good things’ of the world. His brother’s observation that afternoon, commonplace though it was, had set him thinking, and for the moment swept away the decent veil with which he covered the ambition he seldom cared to look at fairly in the face. Usually he called it the hope of usefulness to his fellows, the wish to serve his country, a patriot’s noble aim; but to-night these sophistries were laid aside. He saw and knew himself to be a man athirst for personal fame, famishing for applause, greedy of every mark of honour, of each outward symbol of victory in the struggle towards the front. To be first, foremost, to surpass others; to compel their homage, to wrest from Fortune by the strength of his right hand her richest prizes—these were the darling objects of his heart. To-night he saw himself with a great clearness, and knew the face of the tempter, as it looked from the smouldering embers into his own darkly brooding eyes.

CHAPTER VII

‘Vessels large may venture more,
But little boats should keep near shore.’

JOHN MOWBRAY had got his own way. Where mere force of will sufficed, he was likely to get it often ; for he was not a man who suffered himself to be easily discouraged, and on the present occasion he had very distinctly made up his mind that it was Rhona’s duty to take up the work her mother had been forced to relinquish.

John’s best friends had now and then been known to question whether the objects he took up were always worth the concentration of energy he expended on them. He was terribly in earnest over them, and at the same time fortunate in that he never himself doubted their importance. It was pain and grief to him to see any enterprise abandoned that had once been fairly begun ; and the few brief letters he wrote to Rhona from London contained a hint apiece about the duty of not withdrawing one’s hand from the plough, and about harvest-fields that were waiting for the sickle.

He was one of those people who ride a proverbial saying to death. ‘What,’ Rhona once took courage to ask him, ‘of the ploughs for which the right guiding hand had not been found—the fields where the grain was still unripe?’ John did not answer that letter.

Practically, it was enough for him that a work had been projected, with a fair promise of usefulness. It behoved him to leave no stone unturned until it was carried through, no matter what obstacles met him on the way. Rhona fairly astonished him. It was not in his power to understand how the over-estimate of her own powers, with which he had

once taxed her, now made her shrink with double reluctance from being put forward.

On the morning of the school feast, while tents were being pitched, and everybody was busy cutting bread and butter, he marched down upon the Grange, and took the unwilling Rhona by storm.

Their dialogue was characteristic enough—proud and humble, loyal and impatient on her side; very calm, dogmatic, and dictatorial on his. Rhona had been captured on the door-step, and she stood just within the dark porch, impatient for release. John had seated himself composedly on one of the oak settles in the shadow. She was carrying a basket on her arm, out of which, as she listened, she occasionally flung a handful of grain to an old hen, which, with a brood of young pheasants following her, was stepping daintily across the gravel sweep. There was a broad noon-day glare outside; cool blue shadows; burnished pigeons fluttering down peacefully from the roofs; beyond, the soft cooing of doves came from the deep wood. He spoke in short, quiet sentences; she, quickly and impatiently.

‘It is distinctly your duty.’

‘I don’t see it.’

‘You will soon,’ very calmly.

‘I tell you it is not fit work for me.’

‘There is no one else to take it in hand at present.’

‘Very well, then, it had better be left alone.’

‘You will have to try.’

‘I—will—not—’ tossing a shower of barley among the little pheasants.

‘You do not grudge your time or trouble, I presume?’

She turned on him angrily. ‘You know I do not.’

‘What, then? You are afraid of failing. Why should you fear? Or if you do fail, what does it signify, if you have done your best?’

‘You know nothing about it.’

‘I know that the fear of failure is often vanity in disguise.’

John Mowbray’s arrows had a way of hitting some spot, which, though not the mark itself, was sufficiently near it to be particularly aggravating.

‘I don’t comprehend your change of mind, Rhona. It seems that you soon grow cold. There was a time when this appeared to be very near your heart.’

Rhona was roused at last to say all she had most firmly resolved to keep to herself. She told him with burning cheeks, and a voice the quivering of which she hated to let him hear, of her past arrogance—he had been right in upbraiding her, she had doubted her mother’s powers, and believed presumptuously in her own—but her eyes were open now, and she turned with horror from the task she had hankered after in her ignorance.

John heard her with great equanimity. Rhona’s mistakes and scruples were not the subjects under discussion—they need not be entered into at present. He proceeded to take a long, blue envelope out of his pocket, and to put it quietly into her hand. ‘Before we say more, I should like you to look at this.’

Rhona took it with a careless little bend of the head, her composure entirely restored by the coolness with which he received a confession that cost her so much. She flung another handful of barley to the pigeons, and waited to watch them scramble for it, before she drew the paper indifferently out of its cover. It was a long letter, in his own handwriting, addressed to Mrs. Somerville. Rhona glanced listlessly down the first page—read on with aroused interest, and finally sank down on to the bench behind her, so breathlessly engrossed as to be quite oblivious of John Mowbray at the other end of the bench, looking straight in front of him, and vouchsafing no glance at her changing face and deepened colour.

The paper was the fulfilment of his part of the contract made in London. In the shape of this letter to Mrs. Somerville he had embodied his recollections of his rector—his beloved master, as he fondly called him. The writing of it was simply masterly—graphic, terse, vigorous, subtly appreciative, and, withal, lighted up from end to end, especially as the story drew to a conclusion, with an affection that almost joined the tenderness of a woman’s love to the strength and fervour of a disciple’s devotion.

Over Rhona it threw the same spell as the descriptions he used to give to her and to her mother last autumn in London. It brought back on her, in more than its first freshness, the pride and the pain, and the great sorrowful yearning that the world should hear how he, being dead, could yet speak, and how he lived and reigned still, in the hearts of those who had known him.

She scarcely thought of John Mowbray. He had achieved at least this triumph, that his writing had entirely obliterated all thought of the writer. The cold, impassive man sitting beside her seemed to have nothing in common with the author of those burning sentences, that tenderly conceived and touching picture.

Rhona looked up at last with her face alight.

'This is beautiful—most beautiful. Oh, every one must read this.'

He looked at her with a slight, cold smile. 'This is but an infinitesimal bit of a large work—remember that.'

Rhona did not hear. She had turned back to one part of the manuscript that had especially moved her by its exquisite pathos and simplicity.

'You did love him,' she exclaimed, with a sudden realisation of his personality.

'That is not the question,' he answered, gravely.

She made an impatient step out into the sunshine, then stopped, and looked back at him over her shoulder as his words arrested her. He spoke rather sadly :

'I cannot understand your hesitations and scruples. I have been reading over many of his letters of late. Rhona ! if you only knew how the world needs his words !'

She turned round. His honest hero-worship carried the day at last. Rhona presently watched him walking serenely away in his long clerical coat. He had laid a burden on her shoulders that was too heavy for her to bear ; but from his enthusiasm she irresistibly caught fire. He, on his part, had given her the best advice he was capable of. Success or failure lay hidden in the future.

One thing which he had said made Rhona laugh out aloud by herself, when she thought of it afterwards. 'My

brother Adrian means to stay on here for the present. As far as mere literary criticism goes, you could scarcely have a better adviser. I shall tell him to be ready to give you any help you may need.'

A likely story! Adrian Mowbray and she taking friendly counsel over this most sacred work of hers. The suggestion was in Rhona's mind, when Mr. Mowbray came to sit by her under the lime-trees at the school feast, and gave a little additional touch of distant stateliness to her manner.

However, there was not much to be gained by disquieting herself in vain, for she was convinced that the Dean of Morechester's answer to John Mowbray's proposal would put a prompt extinguisher on the whole scheme. But, wonder of wonders, he assented cordially, only stipulating that Rhona should write ostensibly under the cover of her mother's name. His letter of consent came in a big blue envelope, just like the one John had put into her hand. And then it appeared that the dean also had committed to writing his personal recollections of his friend, or, as he expressed it, had thrown off a slight monograph in the intervals of more prosaic and less congenial labours.

'Now I understand. I am sure it would break the dear dean's heart if this did not appear in print,' said Rhona, raising her eyes with a smile from the neatly-written sheets.

But John had no answering smile. 'It is of course more satisfactory not to have laboured in vain.'

Rhona looked at him from head to foot, and sighed. To be destitute of any sense of humour made a person rather difficult to deal with.

John was fated to bring more troubles of the same description on her. Very shyly and modestly, as secretly as she possibly could, Rhona set to work, trying to hide her undertaking from Uncle Dick first of all, but also from Geoffrey and from Hilary. As she began with reverential hands to unfold the papers which had passed into her keeping, she had a sort of impression that her father was standing behind her chair, and that if she looked up she would meet his eyes, questioning her by what right she ventured to intrude into his private affairs. That feeling gradually

passed off, or was nearly forgotten in her indignation at the cruel trick, as she thought it, which John Mowbray, in all good faith, played on her before he went away.

One morning, without any kind of warning, he brought his brother into the upstairs sitting-room, where she lived and worked, and which she had hitherto looked on as her own unassailable fortress.

She was bending over a parcel of letters, which she had just unfolded, and was so engrossed by them that she did not hear the door open. Suddenly she heard John's voice speaking to his brother, who was following him. She jumped up, and stood facing them. It was an unlucky moment. Something in the letter she was reading had brought her old life vividly before her. She could only hope that the tide of scarlet which she felt rushing up into her cheeks would burn up the two inconvenient tears that were rolling down them. It was no good trying to brush them away, only to call them more prominently into notice. To be found by these two men, of all people in the world, crying like a school-child over her task! Poor Rhona's shy, youthful dignity was sorely put to the proof.

There they stood, this pair of tall, stern, grave brothers, filling up her little room, and fixing on her their keen, critical gaze.

'I thought,' John's voice reached her out of a sort of fog, 'I thought it well to bring my brother here before I went to London, as he may be of some service to you after I am gone.'

The elder brother shook Rhona by the hand. 'It is a shame to invade you like this. I ought to apologise; but John was inexorable. What a bewitching little study you have got up here!'

With a momentary relief Rhona felt that his eyes had quitted her burning, crimson face, and were wandering complacently round the quaintly-shaped little room, with its square, low recesses for windows and fireplace, and its old-fashioned plenishing. 'It is an odd little old room,' she said, breathlessly, wishing that he would confine his attention to the lumbering old Chippendale bureau, rich in drawers and

pigeon-holes without number, and that he would take no notice of the heaps of manuscripts that were tumbling all over it.

‘A perfect author’s paradise,’ he said, pointing to it with a smile. But John had no notion of wasting time over such vanities as Wardour-Street-looking *secrétaires*, or *bric-à-brac* of any description.

‘I am glad to observe that you are settling to your work,’ he observed with austere approbation.

Rhona never thought of asking her visitors to sit down; she herself remained standing before them like a culprit, vainly longing for strength of mind to put down John with dignity, and to treat her other guest as an ordinary visitor.

She felt that she was on her trial before him for literary aspirations—and that taking heed of the jars in the windows full of roses, of her mother’s knitting on the work-table, and of a Mudie volume half open on the sofa, he was despising the whole establishment as unworkmanlike and frivolous.

John talked tranquilly on. ‘I have explained what I wish to Adrian, and he will be invaluable to you in all questions relating to writing for the press. He has plenty of experience in such matters. I have told him, too, that I would by no means have you ask his advice on any subjects connected with your father’s opinions or course of action—he would be about the last man I should wish you to consult on a controversial topic, as he is perfectly aware.’ Adrian gave him a short nod of pleased acquiescence. ‘But in all purely literary matters you could scarcely have a more competent guide.’

‘No,’ in a breathless whisper, was all Rhona was capable of answering. Her eyes were fastened on the floor. Mr. Mowbray came a step or two nearer; she put her hand on to the table behind her to support herself, and knew that he must see how it was trembling. Never had she felt so forlorn, so youthful and defenceless.

‘You have undertaken a hard task,’ he said, not unkindly.

‘I did not wish for it,’ she answered in a low voice. Lifting up her eyes for a moment, she saw that he was

looking down at her, with what she imagined to be a mixture of pity and amusement.

'I shall be glad if I can be of the smallest use to you at any time.'

'Of course you can be of use.' John's forcible tones drowned her weak 'Thank you.' 'There are a thousand things connected with the technical part of preparing a work for the press that she must be thoroughly ignorant of. You will be of very great service to her.'

'If she will allow me,' added Adrian, with rather a quaint glance at her.

'For instance, are you aware, Rhona, that you must write only on one side of the paper? Is there anything of your writing here that you can show us as a specimen?' and John approached the bureau, and ruthlessly uncarthed a blotted sheet of foolscap paper.

Rhona sprang forward, trying to interpose, but suddenly stricken speechless like a person in a nightmare. Was he going to read aloud?

But his brother interposed.

'No, no,' and he pushed the sheets back under the friendly shelter of the blotting-paper without looking at them. And then he laughed outright: 'Come, John; you should have some mercy on the nerves of such susceptible people as we poor authors.'

But the 'we' only doubled her discomfort, though she was forlornly conscious of its good-natured intention. She could measure the full depth of the abyss that separated her from him. He was only laughing at her, under cover of these courteous words. Full well she knew how serenely superior he felt himself to be to all such weaknesses as 'nerves' or author's susceptibilities.

Still she stood before him in shame-faced, tongue-tied misery, all the while chafing at the involuntary homage that her silence seemed to offer him. And yet she liked him, strange to say, and had a queer intuition that under other conditions she could have trusted him—could have told him all that was in her heart with far more ease than she had ever felt in speaking to his brother. Only her con-

ditions would be hard ones to fulfil: John must be a hundred miles away, for one; and Adrian Mowbray himself must not be the person who had been told that she adored his poems.

Rhona needed comfort; for already the ardour of secret enthusiasm, which she had brought to her work, was being followed by a reaction of despair. In her ignorance she had fancied that she was going straightway to paint a great portrait. The noble outline that she had to trace was engraven on her heart, and who was more vividly familiar than she was with all the subtle lines and touches that give force and character to a picture? She fell to work, all hope and fire. In less than a week the colours had faded on her palette; the outline even that she had been so sure of was growing blurred and indistinct.

If John Mowbray had been any one but John Mowbray, she must have gone to him with her bitter disappointment, and confessed that she had failed at the very outset; but he had a singular power of repressing impulsive actions and manifestations of emotion. With great surprise Rhona realised that she could have spoken much sooner to this stranger brother of his, for all the coldness of his manner and the sarcastic lines about his mouth.

'If I might venture to give Miss Somerville one word of advice,' he was saying, and his voice sounded cordial and straightforward, 'it would be not to overtax herself. Do not go at your work too vehemently; take time, and keep cool. Give yourself plenty of holidays. Yes, John,' for that worthy gave a kind of snort; 'plenty of time to be out of doors, and for reading and resting. I should like to say for sleeping, if I dared—because I know how tempting it is for beginners to work at night—only I am sure Miss Somerville would not attend to me.'

'Thank you, you are very kind; but I do very little,' said Rhona, twisting her hands nervously together, and not raising her eyes.

He stood still for a moment and then held out his hand.

'It would be easy for me to say, Don't get over-elated, nor yet too quickly out of heart.'

It was over, this ordeal of John's devising, out of which she felt herself to have come so ignominiously.

He was going out of the room, and John, all complacency, was bidding her good-bye ; he was going to London by the mid-day train.

'*Surtout point de zèle,*' quoted Mr. Mowbray, looking back with a smile as he closed the door.

'John,' he said, as a few minutes afterwards he and his brother were going down the cedar walk towards the village, 'do you know at all what you are about, setting that girl to write her father's life? I wonder if you do!'

'She seemed the most natural person,' answered John.

'Well,' pursued the elder brother, 'it's no business of mine, certainly ; but there appears to me to be a species of cruelty about it—quite unconscious on your part, no doubt—but very real, and I feel bound to enter my protest once for all. Of course, I know better than to expect you to attend to me.'

'I don't see the cruelty,' said John. 'On the contrary, it was a noble life, and one which is worthy to be written.'

'And so you set his own daughter to write it. The man's own daughter—half a child and wholly a woman—an ignorant, scrupulous, inexperienced, affectionate little girl.'

'Come, I don't think Rhona is as bad as that.'

'Not affectionate——?'

'Affectionate? Oh yes, doubtless—affectionate as a matter of course.'

'But not full of scruples and misgivings, and wholly ignorant of the world.'

'Jasper Somerville was not a man of the world. He does not need one for his biographer. His daughter was devoted to him ; she can only be pleased, and proud to be trusted.'

'Then you did not look at her poor little face just now.'

'Not specially. Why should I? I don't see your point, Adrian. To study and describe so pure and beautiful a life as her father's can be no unfitting task for a woman.'

'Yet a very trying one, perhaps.'

'Trying! Why so? I cannot make out what you are

driving at. There is nothing to be hidden or glossed over, or explained away.' John's voice assumed a tone of triumph. 'No page in that past is stained with doubts and difficulties. *His* trumpet, at least, gave out no uncertain sound.'

Adrian smiled, a peculiar melancholy, rather ironical smile, which often crossed his face when other men would just have shrugged their shoulders.

'Pardon me,' he said, 'I have done. By all means let her write on. Hitherto I must have had a false impression of your friend. I looked on him as rather a remarkable man, as one who thought independently, and was not in the habit of shirking the problems of life, but of judging of them for himself. I suppose I was mistaken, so I have not a word more to say. If his life is worth writing at all, a girl is his most fitting biographer. You are perfectly right.'

'And you are wrong, and wilfully unfair in the position you have taken up,' retorted John with unwonted warmth. But they had reached the Grange gate, the dogcart stood there waiting to take him to the station, and Mr. Heathcote and Geoffrey, with Hilary and her grandfather, and a crowd of dogs, were all standing round, waiting to see him off.

'Poor John!' said his brother, looking after him.

It was wonderful how many people said 'poor John!' as the carriage rolled away—the archdeacon and Mr. Heathcote, as well as John's own brother.

There was only honest sympathy and regret in the 'poor John!' of the master of the Grange. It filled him with good-natured pity to see a poor fellow going back to be mewed up in London, away from the blue sky and the fresh September breeze, and the opening delights of another shooting season. Adrian Mowbray pitied his brother, too, after an undefined fashion—pitied him for his lack of discernment, for his short-sighted zeal, and for the disappointments which he believed life had in store for him.

'I am glad he is gone,' said Hilary in a thoughtful tone, as she was driving her grandfather home in his dogcart.

'Are you, Hilary? Why?'

'I don't think John is improved,' she said, gravely. 'I

don't think he has a good heart ; he positively dislikes poor Scamp. Last time he was at Hithersea his manner to the dog was most unpleasant. Scamp felt it very much—and then, grandfather, Mrs. Bloomfield told him I was not judicious.'

'Well, Hilary, that was not John's fault. Did Mrs. Bloomfield really say so?' in a tone of surprise. 'I don't see it myself, child, but there may be some truth in it—who knows?'

Hilary was deep in meditation.

'I shouldn't wonder if it was the ferrets,' she said, presently. 'I believe Mrs. Bloomfield does object to them. One of them escaped out of its bag the other day when I left them in the hall ; and, unluckily, it got under her chair and bit her legs. I don't think Mrs. Bloomfield liked it.'

'Very possibly not.'

'But it was only an accident, grandfather. The poor dear ferret meant no harm.'

'Only it takes one by surprise.' The archdeacon's voice was gently argumentative.

'I am sure it bites me often enough,' said Hilary, 'and I don't mind. Look at my finger. One must be reasonable. The poor ferret was feeling very poorly with a swelled face the day it bit me on that finger. It had been bitten by a rat itself, and, of course, it felt out of sorts.—It's very odd, grandfather, none of the servants seem to like the ferrets.'

'They ought not to run loose about the house.' He still spoke in a suggestive voice, as if advancing a doubtful proposition. 'There was one in my bedroom the other day. They should be kept in their proper place!'

'Oh yes, grandfather,' demurely, 'and so ought Scamp.'

'To be sure! Certainly!' The archdeacon, long ago convicted of spoiling Scamp, rubbed his chin. 'Certainly! —See, Hilary,' he added, quickly, 'what a fine covey of partridges there is over the hedge yonder, in the gravel-pit fields!'

The innocent little *ruse* was crowned with immediate success.

'Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen!' counted Hilary eagerly,

standing up in the dogcart to see better. 'There they go into the stubble, within easy shot!' And she dropped the reins, and held up her hands in the attitude of shooting. 'If Adrian Mowbray comes here on Tuesday, he will find plenty of birds, grandfather.'

Her grandfather quietly gathered up the reins she had let drop. The old mare had only taken advantage of her freedom to meander into the hedge, and crop a green shoot or two. So they jogged homewards, Hilary talking merrily about the shooting, and the archdeacon well satisfied at having diverted the conversation from the vexed question of Scamp's proper place.

After all, Mrs. Bloomfield's strictures were not so very unjust. Hilary, impetuous and warm-hearted, was not a model of wise management, and her grandfather could not find it in his heart to cross her. Himself the very embodiment of charity, hoping all things, believing all things, suffering long, and unalterably kind, he let Hilary take her wilful way unhindered, looking on at her proceedings with placid, half-humorous acquiescence. So the ægis of Hilary's protection was cast unquestioned over all the naughtiest children in the school; the idle little girls who made their 'guv'ness's heart ache, that they did'; and the unruly boys who refused to 'let nobody l'arn them.' Even those shiftless mothers who couldn't 'compass no ways to keep Sam and Tom in order, but didn't feel as though they could take the stick to them, if it was ever so,' found in Hilary a sympathetic and half-admiring defender.

Her chosen follower, Ned Hawker, was a member of one of the least reputable families in Hithersea—people who did not even belong to the parish, but had come to the place on one of the coal-barges, and settled down in a tumble-down cottage on the fen. Past counting were the pitched battles, fought by Hilary with Reynolds, the grumpy, shrewd old gardener at the Grange, on behalf of Ned Hawker and his elder brother Jack. For, 'unluckily,' as Hilary used to say, 'Bat Reynolds liked Jack very much, and Jack was, oh! dreadfully fond of Bat. They couldn't help themselves, poor things!'

Now Bat, or Bet, as she would have been called anywhere but in Norfolk, otherwise Elizabeth, was the village beauty, her father's pride—a fair, apple-faced little damsel, with lint-white locks and a pair of surprised blue eyes; and Jack Hawker, an idle young good-for-nothing, half a gipsy and more than half a poacher, was not a desirable son-in-law.

'But Bat likes him, captain,' said Hilary, pleading his cause with Geoffrey, whose influence was supposed to be irresistible, even over so tough a personage as Reynolds.

'Ah, Hilary, people don't always like what is good for them.'

'But Jack has a good heart. It would be the making of him to marry pretty, housewifely, gentle little Bat. It is cruel not to give the poor lad a chance.' Hilary, then aged about thirteen, spoke as if a century of experience had passed over her head. 'You can't expect him to keep steady, if they don't let him marry the girl he likes.'

'Indeed, I do expect it.'

'Don't laugh, captain, it is cruel. I saw Bat yesterday. Poor Bat,' sinking her voice to a whisper, 'she was crying!'

'There are a good many tears shed in the world, one way or another, child,' he said, half sadly, half teasingly.

'But Jack has promised to be steady, and Bat told her father—and that horrid old Reynolds said promises were made of pie-crust.'

'Reynolds has seen a little of life, it seems.'

'Captain, won't you speak to him?'

'No, Hilary.'

'He thinks the "hull world" of you, with your "quarter-deck manners." Bat says so.'

But Geoffrey was proof against poor Bat's wheedling little compliment.

'Jack says he shall go to the bad!' repeated Hilary in deep despondency.

'I am sorry to hear it, for Jack's sake.'

'And Bat is sure her heart will break, captain.'

Poor Hilary was terribly shocked when, one luckless day, Bat went away to stay with an aunt, and married her scapegrace Jack, 'without a by your leave or with your leave from no one,' as said the angry father.

It was not in Hilary, however, to give up her friend. Bat and she had played together as little children, and Bat used always to be twice as good as she was. It was Hilary who tore her frocks, and wet her feet, and otherwise disgraced herself, and Bat who mended her, and dried her, and turned her out after the worst escapade as trim and tidy as herself. Hilary had a vivid, half-compassionate remembrance of herself, a naughty, heavy-hearted trot of four years old, sitting in a passion, under the old mulberry-tree in the Grange garden, screaming at the top of her voice, and of Bat, trim, prim, pretty, and demure, tripping down the trellised walk from the porch of the gardener's cottage. Hilary beholding her, sobbed more vociferously, and crushed the fallen mulberries with her little bare kicking legs.

Bat stood looking at her. 'Don't weep,' she said, using the finest word out of her last prize book.

'What'sweep?' asked downright Hilary, with another kick.

The elder child knelt down, carefully avoiding the squashed mulberries, and with her little apron gently dried the drowned eyes and the poor tear-blistered cheeks. Presently Hilary ceased 'weeping,' and peeped at her new friend under her wet eyelashes. The apple-face pleased her; a pair of mulberry-stained, hot, shaking little hands were suddenly clasped round Bat's white neck, and the love of a very faithful heart was given to her.

Time passed—the children grew up—indeed Bat had been wedded for three years or more, and lived with her husband in his old mother's dilapidated hut at Hithersea—for Reynolds had been as good as his word, and his disobedient child darkened his doors no more.

Alas for the village beauty!—she was pretty still in Hilary's loyal eyes, but to strangers there was little comeliness left in the pinched, sickly face, the dimmed, pale eyes, and faded golden hair. Hilary took Rhona to see her when first she came to Wildenhall. There was a baby in her arms, and a little unkempt child clinging to her untidy skirt. Her face was full of apathy and stolid indifference. She did not seem to care much even for Hilary, who, however, only clung to her the more vehemently.

'The husband's a bad lot, Hilary, that's what he is,' said Mr. Heathcote, as she turned away crestfallen after one of her vain appeals to Reynolds for his daughter's pardon, 'a drinking, poaching young ruffian. Reynolds is in the right of it. Ask old Ashby. I only wish we could catch the lad in the Hithersea coverts one of these fine nights. He should have a lesson, I can promise him.'

'And poor Bat so ill,' sighed Hilary.

'Poor Bat indeed! She should have thought of that before. Poor Bat indeed!'

Hilary's chivalrous championship of her old friend cost her rather dear, by and by.

'Here's a pretty kettle of fish!' and Mr. Heathcote came hurrying in to the breakfast-room at the Grange, one October morning, out of breath and very red in the face. 'I say, where's Hilary?'

'Not here, at this time of the morning. What do you want her for? What's the matter?' and Geoffrey jumped up anxiously.

'Matter! Matter enough, man. Here's old Ashby, and Horne the policeman, and I don't know how many more of them, in my room. A regular free fight last night on Wildenhall heath, and one of Mowbray's keepers murdered, or very near it.'

'But Hilary! What do you want with Hilary?'

'What do I want with Hilary? Bless my soul, I can't stay here all day answering questions. Isn't Hilary hand and glove with all the worst poachers in the place? And here's Horne got a cock-and-a-bull story of her being out on the heath last night with her donkey-cart. I must go at once and look up Mowbray,' and off he posted, followed hastily by Geoffrey.

This was Hilary's story, as she told it afterwards to Rhona.

She had been awakened out of her first sleep by a sudden growl from Scamp's basket at the foot of her bed. She jumped up and listened. Scamp growled angrily again; a little shower of gravel was being thrown against her window.

'Miss Hil'ray,' whispered a boy's voice from beneath, as

she pushed back the lattice, 'I sa', Miss Hil'ray, Bat's took bad.'

The voice was her little groom's—Ned Hawker, Jack's younger brother. Hilary was dressed in no time. As she fastened her rough pilot-coat, her eyes fell on Scamp curled up in drowsy, selfish luxury in his basket. He was awake, but had taken exception to the lighted candle, and lay winking at it, and watching his mistress with sulky uneasiness. But selfish as he, alas! was, there would be some comfort in his companionship. Hilary confirmed his worst misgivings by upsetting him, basket and all, on to the floor. 'Come, Scamp!'

'Scamp stretched himself elaborately—first with his front and then with his hind legs—and bowed to destiny.

Ned was waiting outside as Hilary softly unbolted the back door, and his mother's half-ruinous, draughty cottage stood within a stone's throw of the vicarage gate. The old woman peered at them from the top of the ladder-like stair as they stole noiselessly in, holding a candle in her hand, which threw a Rembrandt-like effect of light and shadow on her withered gipsy face and nut-cracker jaw, and on the gray elf locks that strayed on to her shoulders.

Bat lay on the bed ghastly pale, with a handkerchief pressed to her blue lips. She had broken a blood-vessel—the pillow and sheets were soaked with blood.

'Bat is a-going fast—she is,' said the old woman stolidly, while Hilary stole up to the bedside and knelt down, clasping the limp hand of her old playfellow in both her own.

'She must have a doctor,' was the girl's first thought. Of course she must have a doctor. Where's Jack?

No one answered. The poor little woman on the bed began to cry in a weak way, and the blood flowed afresh.

'Hush! Bat, keep quiet.'

'You're a friend of her'n, aint you?' old Mrs. Hawker said at last. 'You mean well by her.' She sank her voice: 'Jack's out yonder, along o' some o' the other lads—that's where Jack is—but you must keep quiet about it.'

'Is he poaching?' asked Hilary with a sinking heart, and poor Bat moaned and cried again.

'I reckon that's what they call it hercabouts,' the old woman said with a grin.

'Then Ned must go for the doctor.'

Hilary immediately heard the sound of hob-nailed boots scuffling hurriedly downstairs. His mother shook her head.

'The lad fare skeered,' whispered Bat faintly.

'Scared! What of?' said Hilary, throwing back her head. 'Then I'll go, if that's all. I am not scared.'

No one tried to stop her.

'The poor soul will bleed to death in an hour or two if she gets no help,' said Ned's mother in an indifferent tone; and she took up Bat's baby which had just begun to squall lustily, and rocked it roughly on her shoulder.

'Take care on her, mo'r-in-law,' moaned the weak voice from the bed. 'Give her to me;' and the poor little mother tried to raise herself, but sank back, coughing and choked with blood.

'You shall have a doctor, Bat,' said Hilary, turning resolutely to go.

The old woman went to the stair-head and barred her way.

'You mustn't go for to call any one, and split upon my Jack.'

'Didn't I tell you I was going myself?' And Hilary waved her aside with a slight gesture of contempt.

Downstairs she called to Ned, but the dark kitchen was empty. Ned was displaying the better part of valour, and was nowhere to be found.

After that 'all the king's horses and all the king's men' would have failed to stop Hilary. Ned's cowardice, added to his old mother's insulting suspicion that she, Hilary Marston, might betray a secret trusted to her, stung her proud and loyal heart to the quick.

'They might have known me better,' she thought, bitterly, her eyes smarting with indignant tears, as she hurried home and gropingly unlocked the door of her donkey's stable. There was a lantern inside, and she knew where to find some matches.

'Patience was asleep, poor dear,' said Hilary, when she

told her story. 'It seemed a shame to wake her and take her out in the cold; but I told her about it while I was harnessing her, and she quite understood that I could not help it, and was as good as gold.'

Scamp crept into the stable, and courted sleep anew under the straw. Not for long, however—a horse-rug was flung into the bottom of the little cart, and he was summarily disposed of under the scat.

It was a very still night. The wheels sounded unnaturally loud over the gravel in the stable-yard. Hilary paused to listen, half expecting to see lights struck suddenly, and people appearing at the windows—no one stirred except Rover, who came clanking out of his kennel to the extreme length of his chain, wagging his tail, and uttering deep, short, inquiring barks. Hilary silenced him with a pat and a kiss on his glossy black head. She must not risk taking him near those coverts by the road-side which she must pass. The moon, buried in clouds, shone out fitfully now and then.

Waterfield, where Bat's club doctor lived, was four miles off across the heath.

Hilary's little cart has left the lane, and is out on the highway—the white, straight road stretching before her like a line drawn by a slate-pencil, the monotonous song of the wind through the telegraph wires that run beside it moaning in her ears. The tall telegraph posts flit by, one by one. Now she comes near a railway gate, standing up high and white in the darkness. The gatekeeper is fast asleep in his bed; she has to shout again and again before a glimmer of sulky light appears at his window. He is coming. As she waits the mail train whizzes past, with a clank and a rattle, a wisp of white smoke, and a shower of angry sparks. And then the one-legged gatekeeper, maimed years ago by just such another midnight monster as the one that has just whirled by, comes limping out, and grumbling, fumbles at the gate. He does not bear the best of characters in the neighbourhood. Hilary hopes he will not recognise her, and she urges Patience across the level crossing, without taking heed of his sleepy, sullen questions.

On again. Now turning into a grassy cart road, with deep ruts cut in the sandy turf. There is no getting Patience on through the heavy sand; she falls obstinately into a plodding foot's pace. Profound silence—a white-tailed rabbit scuds across the path. An owl flits overhead, fanning her with its noiseless wings—there is a sharp cry from some animal in the hedge. It is growing darker, thicker clouds muffle the moon's white face. The track runs close under a black plantation—a favourite covert of old Ashby's. The wind is passing through the fir-trees with a melancholy, sighing note.

Suddenly as she leans forward, peering along the track, a shadow steals out of a farther covert; it crosses the path—a man's shadow—a man who is running hard. In a moment he is lost in the wilderness of gorse bushes and tall bracken.

Scamp sits up in the cart and growls. He shakes himself free of his horse-rug, and Hilary sees his ears pricked and his eyes straining eagerly ahead. And then a cold, strange, creepy feeling begins to go twining round her heart.

'What is it, Scamp?' in a whisper. He growls again, and stands up as if he was going to jump out of the cart. She seizes him, and tumbles him back, neck-and-crop under the seat—for if Scamp jumps out and leaves her, she knows she shall hardly be able to master her sudden terror.

Just then the distant bell of Waterfield church strikes one.

'Were you ever frightened, Rhona?' Hilary paused to ask. 'It is such a horrid feeling—it makes one sick.'

CHAPTER VIII

‘Weep no more, lady ; lady, weep no more.’

PATIENCE stood stock-still, Scamp, faintly snarling, was recovering his temper as best he could under the seat. Hilary’s heart beat fast.

For out of the silence and darkness a shot rang sharply from the covert ; another, followed by a confusion of blows and shouts, a smothered groan or cry, and then, after a minute or two—silence.

Hilary was sorely tempted to turn back. She half turned her donkey’s head, and Patience responded with alacrity ; but then—poor Bat. No ; there was no help for it. On again, guiding the wheels on to the soft turf, with the hope of slipping noiselessly past the covert, and so escaping notice.

Vain hope—just as they cleared the deep shadow of the trees, and she could again distinguish the donkey’s ears in front of her, a man jumped over the low furze hedge, and ran to Patience’s head and roughly stopped her.

As Hilary recounted her adventures, she was standing before Geoffrey in her grandfather’s study at Hithersea, with her hands clasped behind her back like a culprit, for she understood, confusedly, that almost everybody looked on her story as a confession. She was under a universal ban of disapproval.

Geoffrey, sitting on the edge of the table, was listening intently, an anxious frown furrowing his forehead, occasionally striking the stick on which he was leaning against the floor with a muttered expression of vexation. The old arch-deacon in his arm-chair, with Scamp coiled up across his

knees, took matters quietly enough. Rhona, leaning over the back of his chair, kept her eyes fastened admiringly on Hilary.

'I heard the man's hard breathing,' the girl went on, 'and then Scamp did jump out after all, and rushed at him, barking. I never knew before what a shrill small bark Scamp's is; it seemed no use at all, and the man kicked him out of the way, and swore at him. I called out to him as gruffly as I could to let Patience go that instant; but, instead, directly he heard my voice, he came up close to the cart, and spoke to me. It was Jack Hawker. I knew his voice, and I could see the whites of his black eyes and his teeth under his beard.'

Hilary drew a long breath, and rather wondered at the impatient thump of Geoffrey's stick.

'He knew you, then?'

'Oh yes! and, of course, I was not frightened any more, Jack Hawker was not going to do me any harm. But, before I could tell him about Bat, he began to speak in a thick, queer voice, and he said: "There's a chap here that's badly hurt. They've smashed his skull, and he's like to die unless so be we can get him to a house. You must come along to help me lift him." That was rather bad, captain; and, oh dear, there was Patience nibbling at the furze, and Scamp went hunting a rabbit into the very covert. I thought at least Scamp might have stayed by me. Don't you think so, grandfather?'

'Well, Hilary, I don't know. The poor animal was only following its instinct,' and he pulled the dog's ears gently, and stroked its spotted head.

'Go on, Hilary,' said Geoffrey.

'Well, Jack laid hold of my arm and told me to be quick.'

Hilary paused, threw back her head, and said abruptly: 'I wish I had not been frightened. You or Laurie would have thought nothing of all this, captain.'

'I don't know that; and you are not a man.'

'I know,' petulantly; 'but one cannot bear to be a coward.'

'Why not? I cannot see the good of all this courage for a girl, Hilary. I don't like it.'

She stopped short, and looked at him with dilated eyes, as if his words had really cut her to the quick.

'Do you like women to be cowardly, captain?' she asked presently in a stifled voice.

'No; but one likes one's womenkind to keep out of scrapes,' he answered, speaking far more roughly than usual.

'I didn't know,' she said, and she sat down in a chair by Rhona, and was silent, folding her hands before her.

'Come, child,' continued Geoffrey, 'go on with your story. Let us have the whole of it!'

Hilary stood up again obediently, after swallowing vehemently once or twice.

'I think,' she confided afterwards to Rhona, 'that I expected him to be pleased with me for being brave.'

By degrees she recovered herself as last night's scene rose up again vividly before her, and she went on to describe the queer appearance of the wood in the dead of night: the breathless stillness, broken by furtive stirrings and rustlings of animal life. All was blank darkness to her at first, and then slowly the tree-stems began to stand out, and a dim quivering leaf here and there reached a ray of light, while the black shadows trembled, and came and went, playing fantastic tricks, and there were caves and tunnels of solid darkness leading in all directions.

By this time Jack had fastened the donkey's rein on to the paling, and he and Hilary were pushing their way through the undergrowth in the covert. It seemed to her like the mouth of a pit as she first entered it. Afterwards she felt fir-needles under her feet, and heard a pheasant flutter in a tree above.

Once or twice she tripped over the mossy tree-roots, but Jack guided her, and presently stray moonbeams struggled through the fir-roof, and one fell on to something horribly white lying on the grass—a man's face, a dead man's white face.

Hilary made another halt, and the reflection of a past horror came across her face, which she tried impatiently to shake off.

'What a piece of work I am making. You know all the time he wasn't really dead.'

'Could you see who it was?'

'Jack told me it was one of the squire's underkeepers. His mates, he said, had "took and cut." Jack seemed half stupefied. He knelt down and lifted up the man's head, but it rolled back on his arm. "I wish they hadn't killed him," he said in an odd, dull way. "I reckon he's dead, don't you?" And then I tried to feel if his heart was beating; but, I don't know how it was, my hands shook and I could not tell. Jack went on kneeling there stupidly, hanging his head, and, do you know, he said: "Poor chap, he was one as wanted to wed my Bat." That reminded me, for I had forgotten Bat, and I told him she had broken a blood-vessel; but I couldn't get him to attend. "We were three to one to-night," he began saying, "and it's that fares to hurt me. It was he had the gun. We were snaring hares, when he come upon us quiet-like; he were a powerful strong man." Just then Jack gave a great start, and so did I, for we heard something rustling in the brambles, and a white, ghostly-looking thing came gliding out. Of course it was only old Scamp; but he frightened us, and he came up and began snuffing about and licking the man's hand. All at once he sat down, and threw up his head and howled—long, dismal howls. It woke Jack up out of his maze, and he got up and gave poor Scamp another savage kick.' Hilary's eyes gleamed: 'I hated Jack when he kicked Scamp.'

However, just then both Jack and Hilary saw a sort of quiver run over the man's body, and he drew a faint sigh. 'Jack,' said Hilary slowly, 'the man's alive.'

How they got him out of the wood between them, half dragging, half carrying him, Hilary scarcely knew. He was a heavy man and he hung a dead weight on their hands, but by hook or by crook they tumbled him over the fence, and Jack hoisted him into the donkey-cart. The house at the railway crossing, where the one-legged man lived, was the nearest dwelling, and there they prepared to take him, Hilary sitting in the cart to support him as best she could, and Jack walking by the donkey's head. They were a long

time getting there, over the ruts, and the grass tracks, and down the turfy lane that East Anglians call 'a drift.' Jack was very impatient, and wofully belaboured the poor donkey; and, as the cart jolted, the man's head stirred to and fro on Hilary's lap, and the patches of moonlight made his face look more ghastly.

'A pretty position,' growled Geoffrey.

Jack stopped the cart a little way from the cottage. A coal train was slowly puffing past the railway gate, the gate-keeper's windows were dark and silent. Jack spoke in a husky whisper: 'Go yèou and call up old Short, while I bide along o' *him* and the dicky.' Hilary obeyed. As she got out of the cart he said: 'Miss Hil'ra,' and there was a catch in his throat, 'tis likela you'll be home afore me. Tell Bat not to take on.'

Hilary went up to the door through the little garden; she knocked and called repeatedly, but it was a long time before she roused the surly gatekeeper. He came down at last, his big, weather-beaten wife striding after him when she heard of the wounded man, with a shawl over her head and a candle in her hand. They went back to where Hilary had left the cart. There stood Patience, her long ears and drooping head dimly visible; there was the cart, and the man, groaning faintly now, lying in a heap across it; there was Scamp sitting upon his body, apparently for warmth—there was the whole group drawn up quietly under the shadow of the hedge as she had left it. But Jack was gone.

Hilary called him. She went round the cart. 'Jack!' Scamp jumped down, wagging his tail in answer. She called again. The one-legged gatekeeper grinned. 'Ye mun call louder than that, I reckon.'

Sure enough Jack had disappeared. • It was a question much discussed afterwards at the 'Mowbray Arms' whether he had climbed on to one of the trucks of the coal-train, which had taken the opportunity to stop and pant at its leisure a few yards from the level crossing, as is the way of coal-trains—or whether he had struck across the heath to the canal, and boarded one of the barges lying moored

to the bank for the night. But it did not signify much by what mode he had made good his escape. At all events he was off, and had left no trace behind him.

Most of Hilary's friends secretly rejoiced that she was spared the publicity of appearing at a trial, 'if there had been any one to try. Only Mr. Heathcote grumbled a little. 'A poacher was a poacher after all,' he feelingly remarked.

As for Hilary herself, as soon as she was certified of Jack's departure, and had delivered over her unconscious passenger to the tender mercies of Short and his 'old woman,' she turned Patience resolutely round and trotted bravely off towards Waterfield. She was overpowered with weariness, and by an almost unconquerable longing to go home, and lie down in her bed and sleep; but a spirit of dogged devotion carried the day—she would not give in till her mission was accomplished.

It was six o'clock on a dim, cloudy morning, and the daylight was beginning to steal softly on, when the tired, little gray donkey drew her cart and its anxious occupant across the wooden bridge and on to the fen, where the Hawkers' hovel stood. The sun had risen, but was not yet shining. Trees, buildings, and church wall stood out indistinctly. It was very cold and very quiet. The twilight world still lay asleep, and the tiny red spark in Bat's window had not yet been quite quenched by the daylight. Before the hut, the door of which stood half open, Hilary could distinguish the figure of a boy.

'Ned,' she whispered, far too anxious to recollect her last night's quarrel with cowardly Ned, 'the doctor is coming. Is Bat better?'

'Mother says Bat's all but gone.'

She flung the reins to him.

'Take care of Patience, Ned, she is tired,' and Hilary jumped out of the cart and stumbled upstairs in the dark. The room was very still. The dawn glimmered at the unshaded window, and showed Bat's face on the pillow, with closed eyes and parted lips through which the breath came faintly. Her little child lay asleep beside her—nestled

within the arm that lay heavy and inert against the blue-checked counterpane—a poor, sickly little child, yet its fair pallor scarcely made a less vivid contrast than a rosy cheek with the death hue on the mother's face. The old woman sat nodding in a broken elbow chair. Hilary stole up to the bedside. Yes; Death was there before her. Even unpractised eyes like hers could read his sign-manual on the drawn and sharpened features. The help she had summoned was all in vain.

'The doctor is coming, Bat,' she said gently; but Bat took no notice. There was a long waiting. Short and his wife, she heard afterwards, had waylaid the doctor and got him to bind up the keeper's broken head. The time dragged on slowly till he came, and then he only looked at Bat and shook his head. 'You might have spared yourself the trouble of fetching me, Miss Hilary.' He was a kindly man, but powerless and useless here.

'Jack,' a faint whisper from the bed at last. 'Jack.'

'Jack is all right, Bat. He is quite safe,' whispered Hilary in return.

The girl's eyelashes quivered, and her eyes half opened. 'Did Jack send his love?'

'No, Bat,' Hilary's sobs half choked her, 'he didn't. But he said, "Tell Bat not to take on."'

The eyelids sank again, and a faint, momentary smile, which was both bitter and weary, flickered across her face and vanished.

'It's a little late in the day for him to tell her that,' said the doctor, slowly putting on his gloves.

'Oh, Bat, Bat,' cried Hilary, full of yearning pity, and of that passionate love of existence which makes it so hard for youth to understand that the mere fact of living is no compensation for sorrow, nor death's grave summons always an unwelcome one. 'Cannot you live, my Bat?'

But Bat had fallen back into unconsciousness; and Hilary knelt on, watching her. She scarcely heard that there were steps and voices in the kitchen below, nor saw that Jack's old mother had quietly disappeared. The stairs creaked, but Hilary forgot to be surprised when Mr. Heath-

cote appeared at the foot of the bed, with a countenance of solemnised importance. Then Ashby's rugged face was seen behind him, sorry and compassionate, and Horne the constable followed and stood with him near the stair-head. Both presently drew back to make way for Mr. Mowbray, who silently crossed the room, stood for a moment beside Dick Heathcote, and glanced at the dying woman, then as silently withdrew. But, by and by, a heavy groping hand, in which there was much comfort, was laid on Hilary's bowed head, and there was Geoffrey.

Uncle Dick fidgeted about. He conferred in undertones with Horne, and came back with a creaky attempt at a light tread to the bedside, clearing his throat as for a great effort. 'Hilary, my dear, I am sorry,' he said, in a resounding whisper, 'I do not wish to disturb—it distresses me; but duty must be attended to. I am bound to put the question—Do you know anything of John Hawker?'

Hilary indignantly shook off the hand he had laid upon her arm.

'But after the occurrences of last night, Hilary——'

'Wait, Dick,' interposed Geoffrey, holding up his hand; and Dick, raising his eyebrows, and signing towards Horne, was fain to stand aside, recognising the awful Presence, wherein justice and judgment, as well as love and longing, are forced into impotence and silence.

Rhona was the next person who, that morning, made her way over to Hithersea, in search of Hilary. From the vicarage she hurried on to the Hawkers' cottage, in front of which she found Adrian Mowbray standing by himself. By this time the sun was beginning slowly to pierce the white gauze of the clouds, and to shine with the tempered splendour of crystal and silver, instead of imperial gold. A silvery haze overhung everything, and the fen melted away into vapour. Clear, lazy drops rolled off the trees, and sparkled on the spikes of the gorse bushes, and all sharp outlines were lost in soft and bright folds of mist.

'You had better not go in, Miss Somerville,' said Adrian Mowbray, standing on the doorstep to bar her way. 'The place is crowded already. The doctor and the magistrate,

and the constable are there, and I know not how many besides. Quite enough to mount guard over Hilary !'

'What has Hilary been doing? Is she there? Is she all safe?'

'Yes, she is there—tremendously cut up just now; the poor girl is dying, you know !'

'Bat dying?'

'Yes; or more probably dead by now. It is what people call a happy release, I should imagine. It is not easy to see what Hilary is crying her eyes out for.'

'And Jack gone, they told me !'

'Surely another consoling feature in the case.'

'But the poor little children?'

'Ah, poor little wretches! What a pity it seems that the mother cannot take them with her !' said Mr. Mowbray, lighting a fresh cigar.

He turned, and walked a few steps along the road, Rhona, perforce, walking by his side.

'One cannot help feeling very sorry. It is a sad fate to befall such a young thing as poor Bat.'

'People—even young things—work out their own fate,' said Adrian quickly.

'Yes, perhaps that makes it all the sadder. Her poor little life since she married has been all trouble—and so soon over.'

'The sooner it's over the sooner they sleep,' he quoted.

'Oh, there's no comfort in that—I always think that line is full of despair.'

'Despair is surely an evil to be got rid of at all costs, as quickly as may be.'

'Your brother John would controvert that, I imagine,' said Rhona.

'My brother John is as fond of arguing as an Edinburgh lawyer. What is there to be said against it?'

'If it was only sleep,' said Rhona, with shy hesitation.

'Sleep is not a thing to be despised, all said and done !'

'Only that there is something so much better to be had.'

'Ah! there we pass into the regions of pure conjecture.'

She made no answer. Her former feeling was returning.

He was playing with words, not deeming her worthy of serious discussion. While she was in earnest he was only trifling.

Mr. Mowbray looked at his watch. 'I wonder how long we are expected to wait here!'

'What made you come?' she asked, bluntly.

'I was brought. We all came over in dogcarts—a whole lot of us. I suppose because it was the least likely spot to find Jack Hawker. I don't profess to understand it all. Your uncle and Ashby are both thirsting for his blood. Geoffrey came to champion Hilary; and I don't know clearly why I was wanted, except to vindicate the insulted majesty of the law.—See, here comes your uncle with Hilary, and the rest of them! It is all over with the poor girl, no doubt.'

Hilary's tears were spent for the moment; but her reddened eyelids and tear-stained cheeks showed how many she had shed. Mr. Heathcote had hold of her arm, more to steady her in her evident exhaustion than for any other reason; but Hilary had yielded herself to his grasp as a symbol of captivity.

She came straight up to her cousin. 'I am sorry about your keeper, Adrian,' she said, in a would-be resolute, but very shaky voice; 'but I could not help it. Shall I be tried for murder?'

'Not this time, Hilary, I think,' he replied, gravely.

'Mr. Heathcote said I should be taken up for something—being accessory after the act, I think.'

'You have been trying to point a moral, Neighbour, I perceive,' said Adrian, looking at Uncle Dick over Hilary's head; 'I will not interfere with your lesson. No, Hilary,' and he turned back to her, 'luckily for you, Loveday has an uncommon thick skull. And Ashby,' looking at the old keeper, who was standing with his eyes on the ground, and who shook his head mournfully, 'and Ashby has a soft heart——'

'And that rascal, Hawker, a light pair of heels,' added Mr. Heathcote; 'but for that we should have had another story to tell.'

'Jack Hawker was not the one who struck the blow,' began Hilary, but Adrian Mowbray stopped her.

'There, Hilary, that will do. We have had about enough excuses for Jack Hawker.'

'But have you the least notion, child, who the other ruffian was? Can you give us the slightest clue?' and Uncle Dick was full of hope and bustle in a second.

'No, none; I haven't an idea. Only for poor Bat's sake——' with an incipient sob.

Mr. Mowbray had been looking with a certain manlike disfavour at her swollen eyes and generally battered appearance. It annoyed him, somehow, to see her wild-rose beauty all marred and defaced by tears. He lifted his hand and spoke authoritatively:

'No more, Hilary. You have cried already till you are not fit to be seen. Miss Somerville, take her home and put her to bed, will you? It's the best place for naughty children, especially when they have been sitting up all night,' and he turned away and began talking in an undertone to his keeper.

Hilary stared somewhat at the unwonted tone of command, hesitated for a moment or two, and then gave herself up meekly to Rhona's guidance. After all there was nothing left for her to do. Little Bat lay dead.

Towards afternoon, when she awoke from the deep sleep of weariness into which she had fallen, with Rhona sitting by her bedside, it appeared that there was one person who was very much on her mind, and that was her old antagonist Reynolds.

'For he is in awful trouble, Rhona. I can't think what will become of him. Poor dear old fellow!—being angry with Bat, and never seeing her again before she died. Oh, I am so sorry for him! Can we comfort him, Rhona, do you think? Will it comfort him if we tell him she did not suffer much, and that she was very quiet, and did not seem to be fretting about anything, and that the end was quite easy—just a little sigh and she was dead? Oh, Rhona, I wish she was alive again! It is so glorious to be alive—just to move, and see the sun, and breathe—even if you are

unhappy. Oh, poor Bat ! poor Bat ! so icy cold, and small, and waxen-looking, lying there.'

Rhona felt that Hilary was talking in a wild, heathenish sort of way, but she did not know how to scold or to comfort her just then. Differing alike from the girl's cry of passionate clinging to life, and from Adrian Mowbray's careless, hackneyed quotation about sleep, a scrap of verse that she had heard by chance would keep on running in her head—

'Come, sweet Death ! Be persuaded, O beautiful Death !
In mercy come quickly—'

The words were written about a poor soldier, passing away after a battle in mortal pain. They were simply the prayer of some watcher in the camp hospital that the death agony might be shortened—not that heaven's homelike gate might be thrown wide to a captive exile hastening to be free.

She thought of her father's deathbed. Death wears many aspects. Its mystery—be it dreaded or courted—could only look beautiful when it came to crown some life like his ; a life so lived, that the glad soul carries up with it, as on angels' wings, the thoughts of the watchers from this shadowed world to the threshold of a brighter life.

'Well, it can't be helped.' Hilary jumped up suddenly, and scared away Rhona's musings by beginning to whistle. 'All we can do now is to go and try to cheer up poor dear old Reynolds.'

Hilary's bitterest enemy would have become a 'poor dear' the instant he was in trouble. It was the law of her nature. 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him,' was the pleasantest of all commands to her.

They found Reynolds potting carnations in the kitchen-garden at the Grange. Hilary jumped over a row of forcing pits, holding out both her hands to him: 'Reynolds, poor Reynolds, you have heard ?'

The old gardener slowly stood erect, and suffered her to take one of his hands, the other was occupied by a pot.

'Yis, Miss Hil'ra', I ha' gotten of the noos. I am aware

Eliza-bat is no more. Poor Bat!' he added, after a moment. 'Poor little mawther!'

'Oh, my dear Reynolds,' went on Hilary, earnestly, 'she forgave you—I am quite sure she did—she was so gentle always. She knew you would come round in time——'

'Bat—forgived—of *me*?'

'I am certain she did. Maybe she knows now how sorry you are. We cannot tell, you know.'

Reynolds released his hand, and pressed down the mould carefully round the freshly-planted flower. 'There's a sight of folk,' he said, slowly, and he put the pot on the shelf, and stood upright and stiff, 'a sight of folk, and I don't say nothin' agin them, as would have lodged a curse on their girl's head, as have been served as Eliza-bat served me, and that's the treuth. But that's not the likes o' me—I ha' pardoned of her——'

'Oh, Reynolds,' exclaimed Hilary, involuntarily.

'I ha' pardoned of the girl—I wouldn't go so far as to say forgive, for it don't fare as though 't were becomin' in me to be that onconsistent. But I ha' pardoned of Eliza-bat, and I wishes of her well where she is gone, together.'

There was a twitch in the corner of the old man's stubborn mouth, a little ostentatious indifference in the way he turned back to the carnations, that in some small measure softened Hilary's displeasure.

'I thought you would be quite broken-hearted,' she said in a surprised voice.

'Some might, Miss Hil'ra'—'tis likela some might; but I'm one as has learnt how to bear up.'

'I am sure you must be very miserable, though you won't say so, and I came to try and comfort you. Dear Bat's little children are still left——'

'I'm one,' again began the old man, 'as sees their deuty plain and does it faithful, bless the Lord. If so be as Eliza-bat's children—the babe, and likewise the suckling, behave similar to what they should behave, I'm of a mind to sitivate and edicate the tu—pervisin', and Reynolds planted a spade firmly in his heap of leaf-mould, 'as that there ongain chap of a father of theirn keeps clear away.'

'Grandfather will never let Bat's dear little children want, if you don't care for them, Reynolds,' said Hilary, ready to be offended on her dead friend's behalf. 'He said so this morning.'

'I make no doubt but what the old gentleman have the best attentions,' retorted Reynolds, 'ter fare like him, and I admire the richness of his usual habits; but,' and Reynolds bristled all over with sudden fierceness, 'but, my Bat's offshuts belongs to me, and no one else shall du for them but myself; and, lawk, I'll go and fetch them home to mine, this very blessed night, if any one offers to meddle or make betwixt them and me, as is their grandfather lawful—that I will.'

Reynolds, glaring at her with both quivering hands grasping the spade, took Hilary quite by surprise. She no longer felt mistress of the situation.

'It's a pity poor Bat did not know that you meant to be kind, Reynolds,' she said, sorrowfully reproachful; 'she would have died happier.'

'Train up a child, Miss Hil'ra,' continued the old man, turning a deaf ear to this view of the subject, 'train up a child, says Scriptur, in the way he shall go—and so I shall, for them there tender twigs. I'm well aware as I have every perceivin' for larning of them their deuties, and 'tis a mercy for them as their worldly father has been took right away from the evil to come—so 'tis.'

And with this exordium Reynolds retired doggedly into his potting-shed.

After this, more to her own surprise than that of any one else, Hilary fell ill with distress and over-fatigue, and for a few days lay puzzled and restless in her bed. She re-appeared at the Grange with larger eyes and paler cheeks, and with a little air of deprecation and uncertainty that sat oddly on her rough-and-ready manner.

Geoffrey's low estimate of the virtue of courage in a woman had impressed her deeply. She took it very much to heart. Bravery was the one cherished quality she had always cultivated and aspired to. 'She did not think,' she confided regretfully to Rhona, 'she could ever manage to

be afraid of cows, or horses, or burglars, or even,' in a lowered voice, 'of ghosts.'

'I don't suppose you could,' said Rhona, laughing. 'And, indeed, why should you?'

'Captain Geoffrey believes in ghosts.'

It was in a spirit of atonement and devotion that Hilary was now often to be found in the little business-room, where Geoffrey and his violoncello chiefly dwelt, reading aloud to him out of the scientific books in which he took delight, and which bored and wearied her unspeakably. One day she was standing by the open window, resting her book on the ledge outside, and reading about 'star distances' in an especially beloved work on astronomy. Geoffrey sat listening with his head raised, and a look of more than content upon his face—a curious, uplifted, worshipping look, almost as if he saw.

It was one of the strangely lovely days of St. Luke's 'little summer.' The droning of bees was in the air, the sweet hot smell of sun-warmed grass came in at the window, the glow of yellow turning beeches, of crimson maples, of golden tulip-trees, of red sumachs, kindled a flamelike glory over the old garden of the Grange. From the barn came the monotonous whirr and hum of a threshing machine. The pigeons hovered and fluttered about the roofs. It was an out-of-doors day, if ever there was one. Hilary held in her hand the leaf of a variegated vine that grew against the stable-wall, veined and stained with gold and purple, with pink and scarlet and emerald, a very epitome of autumn tints. Now and again she laid it lovingly against the page she was reading from. And that page was aglow also, with marvels and wonders, with dreams of strange sublimity, with star-spaces and incalculable distances, with overwhelming records of worlds travelling with immeasurable velocity through space—all the mighty star-lore that is 'encircled with infinity.'

'Grand, isn't it?' said Geoffrey, with a rapt smile, as she slowly turned a leaf, glancing out meanwhile at the sunlit garden. 'Do you understand it, child?'

'No, captain,' abruptly. His face fell.

'But you don't mind reading it. Surely it must delight you. Think of being able to measure the distance to one of the nearest stars, and finding it forty billions of miles away.'

Hilary stretched her arms above her head and yawned. 'I believe,' he continued, 'it would take about three hundred thousand years even to count forty billions, and so——' The oppression deepened on Hilary's brow. 'Shall I go on?' she interrupted, cutting short the calculation she saw impending.

'Yes, by all means go on.'

'Jupiter,' read Hilary, her voice choking a little, 'Jupiter revolves in an elliptic orbit round the sun in the focus, at a mean distance of four hundred and eighty-two million miles——'

Suddenly she broke down altogether, flinging away the book, and sinking down on to the floor with her face buried in her hands.

'Hilary, child, what's the matter? Are you tired?'

'No, captain. Oh, I can't stand it. I can't bear it.'

'What can't you bear? Are you still grieving about Bat?' with a faint tinge of impatience in his tone; for Geoffrey, along with all Hilary's people, notwithstanding their sincere sympathy with the girl's first sorrow, had begun to think that the days of mourning for Bat should be drawing near a close. 'Is it about Bat?'

'Bat? No! It is the stars. I can't bear them, captain; they are so big and far away, and such an awful lot of them!'

'Strange!' said Geoffrey; 'and to me it seems as if I were hearing of my Father's property—of my own inheritance. This little world of ours, a mere grain of dust, the smallest speck in the great infinitude of space——'

'Oh, captain, don't!' Hilary broke in.

'Don't what, Hilary? What is it all about?'

'Don't make it all so dreadfully big and oppressive! It crushes one!'

He stroked his beard and was silent for a moment. 'Strange,' he said again, 'poor child! And these glimpses

into infinitude, the countless millions of stars, the mighty sweep of planets on their way, give me new life ; this short, dark night of time, and then—the light of eternity——Why, Hilary?’ for, to his surprise, she was sobbing like a child.

‘Oh, captain, I will try to be glad for you, but I cannot like it. This world is big enough, and the sun, and Jupiter, and the stars and—everything is so dreadfully far away ; b—billions of miles,’ said Hilary, with another sob.

Poor little short-sighted, true-hearted Hilary ! she was not meant to count the worlds, or mete out the heavens with a span, and unravel the mysteries of time and space. This wide—this narrow—world, this great, small life was quite enough for her.

CHAPTER IX

‘Youth at the helm.’

‘AND Val Fitzhugh is coming,’ Mr. Mowbray said. Rhona with Hilary and Geoffrey had fallen in with him near his park gates, as he and Mr. Heathcote were walking home in the twilight from shooting. Uncle Dick had been inquiring about a forthcoming shooting party, and after giving them a string of names, he made a short pause before adding : ‘And Val Fitzhugh is coming.’

‘Val Fitzhugh!’ involuntarily echoed Rhona, ‘coming here? Val Fitzhugh!’

‘You know him, don’t you?’ turning his eyes on her in his sudden way, and seeing more clearly, as she believed, in the half darkness than most men in broad daylight.

‘No—yes. I mean it is a long time ago. We used to know him.’

‘So I have heard.’

‘Val Fitzhugh,’ struck in Geoffrey Heathcote, to his niece’s relief. ‘Is he coming to you? I am glad to hear it. He was one of my boys on board the *Invincible*, years ago. I liked him greatly—a very fine, cheery young fellow, and one of the handsomest lads you ever saw in your life.’

‘He is that still,’ Adrian said, quietly.

‘And,’ pursued Geoffrey with a smile, ‘as idle and frivolous a young dog as ever breathed, I am afraid; but such a nice fellow, we were all fond of him. No one could help it. Poor Val, I shall be glad to see the boy again.’

‘Well, on the 15th he comes. I was staying with his father at Clyffe the other day, and he was there, home on leave, so I asked him to come and shoot.’

And having reached the park gates, Mr. Mowbray bade them good-night, leaving Rhona to wonder all the way home how he had heard that she knew Val Fitzhugh, and why he had invited him to Wildenhall. In general his guests were men of such a very different stamp. Distinguished sort of people, House of Commons' friends, grave statesmen, or else either authors, or artists, famous shots, or good talkers. He and Val Fitzhugh could have literally nothing in common:

Geoffrey meanwhile was making Hilary laugh with stories that sounded like a page out of *Peter Simple*, pranks and feats of Val's midshipman days. Yes, just so. Val had never cared to open a book or to do a scrap of work which he could escape. He was not a bit clever, or scientific, or ambitious—she always knew that, only beautiful, as Geoffrey said, to look at, and as bright to live with, as sunshine in the morning. It was long ago, she told Adrian Mowbray, that for a little while she had known him. Yes, it seemed very long ago now. Then her father had been vexed about it, and she had tried to put the remembrance of a time that had worried him far away from her. They were very few, very far off, those half-childish days—very faintly coloured now.

There was no story to be told. It never grew into a story, it was all so short, so slight, yet at the time so dear. There are episodes in most lives, fugitive and fragile, that are very hard to put into words. This was but a sketch, the study of a story, which, perhaps with different actors, and under altered circumstances, might have had another ending.

Rhona once went with her father to pay a visit at Clyffe Castle, which place belonged to a very dear old college friend of Jasper Somerville's, Lord Fitzhugh—he was Val's father. There were two sons—twins—and Val, the younger brother, was a sailor. It was for the eldest son's coming of age that Lord Fitzhugh had insisted on his old friend coming to stay with him.

Rhona's mother was at that time in Italy, so she and her father went to Clyffe alone. It was the first visit she had ever made as a grown-up young lady. There was a

large party staying in the house, and Val took her in to dinner the evening she arrived.

After that they were always together. It came about quite naturally, and Rhona liked it. She ought to have known better, they told her afterwards, she who lived among thoughtful, hard-working, cultivated people. But that was just it; she did not reason about it; only it turned out that in some unexplored corner of her heart there lay dormant an inconvenient delight in youthful brightness, and careless, childish merriment. She had never realised it before herself, and it was a frame of mind that, with all his wide experience and ready sympathy, her father could not imagine. Perhaps he scarcely remembered her extreme youth. Rhona was leading so earnest and thoughtful a life, struggling so honestly to raise herself a little nearer to his level, that it was a wonder the frivolity which lay dormant within her had not been starved outright. It had not been so, unfortunately, or she might have been spared some rather bitter tears and a few sorrowful days.

For the laughter in Val Fitzhugh's eyes, and his summer's-day manner, and his lazy, mirthful voice awakened some of those chords in Rhona's nature which, though by no means the finest chords, rang out gay and very pleasant music. Rhona's holiday did not last long. Dr. Somerville had no leisure for long visits—but a few days flitted by with magical ease and swiftness. The poor child wondered at herself—she felt so marvellously light of heart, ready to laugh with anybody, and to enjoy everything. She supposed it was because she had never paid a visit to such a delightful place as Clyffe before, where people were all so kind to her. Soon she ceased to wonder at all; it came so naturally to amuse herself, with Val's ever-ready help. A vision of the study at home, with its rows of theological books and scientific reviews, and with the piles and piles of parochial papers and correspondence that must be accumulating during her absence, did crop up now and then, like the dark background to a sunny landscape; but she had not time to dwell on it.

There were cross-country rides, and scrambling walks

over the rocks, and a yacht that lay at anchor in the Cove. All the county came to make merry at Clyffe. There was also a tenants' ball, much to be remembered, at which she and Val danced together, and ran upstairs to look down at the ballroom from the gallery, and stole out of doors to peep at the illuminated avenue, and thought life a very cheerful thing.

The day after that delightful ball Rhona and her father went away.

Val was at the carriage door to say good-bye, with, for once, quite a serious and grieved look upon his handsome face. He and Rhona had laughed and talked as usual until the last moment. It had grown so natural to be together that they hardly realised a coming parting.

When Rhona came down ready for her journey, he turned suddenly quite pale, and he was too guileless and simple not to show when he was sorry just as openly as when he was glad.

Rhona understood all in a moment that her holiday was over; that Val was looking at her with melancholy eyes; and that everybody was watching to see how they bade one another good-bye. She thought Val had the best of it just then. He was going out hunting directly after her departure. He and his brother stood on the steps in their 'pink' coats, and, as the carriage drove away, their horses were being led through the archway of the stable-yard, their stirrup-irons and glossy coats glistening in the sun. Rhona looked back. Val was gazing after the carriage; but Lord Fitzhugh came out of the hall and put his arm over his son's shoulder, and then the elder brother said something which made Val laugh, and—the carriage passed under the gateway, and was going down the hill.

Dr. Somerville settled himself in his corner for the long drive to the station, and asked Rhona to read to him a fine article on 'Modern Philosophic Thought' which had just come out in one of the reviews.

'Pleasuring is hard work, don't you think so, Rhona?' he said, with a smile; but she cut the leaves of the review zealously, and did not answer.

No. Frankly, it was 'Modern Philosophic Thought' and all its environments that appeared hard work to her just then. The machinery of her life was out of gear.

Somehow that visit to Clyffe made her much more childish than she had been before. It was terribly humbling to feel so very young and foolish as she did. She longed to play and laugh; to be merry, amused, idle, like other people of her age. It was not that she adored her father one whit the less, but that all grave pursuits wearied her. Poor Rhona was cross—impatient of hard work, very intolerant of dullness. A good old missionary, who came full of zeal, to stay just then with her father, bored her almost beyond bearing. She liked to sit unemployed, living over again in dreams those sunny days at Clyffe, longing to have Val Fitzhugh to talk to, and to listen to the stories she used to tell him. How pleasant it would be to make him laugh again, and to hear the lazy, interested 'Not really?' with which he had been wont to respond to her descriptions of the learned books she read, of the wise professors, and grave divines she had to entertain, of the solemn, venerable, erudite personage she professed herself to be.

Once or twice her father looked hard at her when they were alone together. They two were too closely in sympathy with one another for him to be unconscious of her wandering attention and suppressed impatience. But he said nothing.

A month or two passed. She was beginning to recover her spirits and complacency when, one fine day, Val Fitzhugh appeared at Morechester without any warning. Rhona was out, and he was shown into her father's study. 'He had got a ship, and was going to sea immediately,' he said; 'but, before he sailed, he could not help coming to say good-bye.'

'And there was just one thing,' he added, after his host, benevolent, but much preoccupied, had talked to, and courteously dismissed him. 'Of course he and Miss Somerville were both rather young, he knew that; but—was there any hope for him? Would Rhona wait for him, and give him a chance when he came back?'

Dr. Somerville rose suddenly, and stood eyeing the young man in the grim silence of utter surprise.

'My father said I ought to tell you first,' said Val, a little daunted.

'You cannot mean that your father sent you to me?'

'N—no! He says there is such a lot of us, we must all go our own way. But he would be tremendously glad, you know. He is awfully fond of Rhona.'

'He is very good,' responded Rhona's father shortly.

At first he was too much taken aback to be displeased, but on reflection he waxed indignant. This very empty-handed young man to talk of wanting Rhona, this lad, who as far as he had noticed him at all, appeared to think life nothing but a species of steeple-chase after amusement, and who, besides, was only just one and twenty. 'It is simply and entirely out of the question!' he said, firmly.

'Not really?' answered poor Val Fitzhugh.

Jasper Somerville, the most kindly and tender-hearted of men, was sorry to see the look of dismay that came into the poor boy's frank eyes. He said to him: 'You do not know my daughter, Mr. Fitzhugh, nor the way she has been brought up. She has lived among thinking and working men; she cares for books, and for serious pursuits. She would not be happy with you, nor you with her.'

'Oh yes, we should,' he pleaded. 'Do let me just ask her? I know the old dons bore her awfully.'

Dr. Somerville could not help laughing, and afterwards they came to some sort of compromise. Rhona was to hear of Val's wishes through her father; he made that a condition, and the young lover was forced to yield.

'Though it's very hard lines,' he said, 'because you are safe to put her against me, all you can! But, of course, I can't help myself.'

And Rhona's father, not doubting for an instant what her answer would be, stood to his point stoutly, hoping to spare her the ungracious task of saying 'No,' or of even being obliged to hear Val plead his cause at all.

She knew nothing of his coming until she saw him in the cathedral at even-song. On a winter's afternoon the

choir was nearly dark, and Rhona's place was in deep shadow. Only a point of light gleamed here and there, at the lectern, in the stalls, and above the desks of the singing men. One candle in front of the tenors' place sent its rays upwards, and shone on a stall behind. So when the anthem was being sung Rhona, from her dark corner, suddenly caught sight of Val's face, flushed and very serious, leaning forward over a huge prayer-book, and peering with intent eyes into the gloom, as if he was searching for some one.

When the service was over Rhona left the choir as usual by a side door; but Val, lingering on the steps near the screen that led into the nave, caught sight of her, and came up hastily, and grasped her hand.

'How are you?' he said, incoherently. 'I must not stay. I could not find you out just now. Why don't they have more candles? I only went to see you—at least, I thought your father would be pleased, you know, at my being at prayers. I say, there he is. Good-night!' and he vanished through the iron gates into the transept.

Dr. Somerville joined his daughter, and they passed out into the cold night air in the cloisters, and there pacing up and down in the dark, he told her what Val had come to say.

Poor Rhona! Her father spoke with a kindly, stinging mixture of pity and amusement; but when she did not say a word in answer, she felt his hand suddenly grip the arm on which he was leaning, as if a stroke had fallen on him.

'Come in,' he said briefly, as they reached their own door. He drew her inexorably, crimson cheeks and quivering lips and all, into the bright lamplight in his study. For a long minute he stood looking at her. 'Rhona,' his voice was all rough and shaking, 'it is not possible. It cannot be. My child, speak to me. I have done right, surely.'

'Oh, father dear,' and with a great rush of sorrow and comfort Rhona felt his arms close round her, and hid her burning face on his shoulder.

'My child,' he said again. 'My child! and she felt his tender grasp, and the trembling of the arm that held her—he who was always so strong and so calm. 'You cannot care for him, my Rhona.'

‘I did not mean it, father. Oh, I am very sorry.’

He put her away softly, and crossed the room and leant against the chimney-piece: This beloved daughter, in whom he delighted, with her rarely blended charm of delicate grace and power of grave thought—she whom his love had set apart from the every-day maidens, who were to be lightly wooed and lightly won, in this work-a-day world. She could not guess how bitter this moment was to him.

‘Father,’ and her hand was laid timidly on his arm. ‘Father, do you mind it? Does it grieve you?’

He shook off her hand. ‘Child, child, how can you ask me? Such as you, and such as he.’

‘I cannot understand how it can be, Rhona,’ he went on, with deepening displeasure. ‘A handsome, good-humoured boy, whom you have known for a couple of weeks, a young fellow who has never cared to open a book, or had ten minutes’ serious thought since he was born—who is an alien to us in tastes, in mode of life, in principle for aught I know. My child, what have I done that you should be ready to leave me for the first stranger who offers you the love of a few idle days, and so little, so very little besides?’

Rhona could not explain, she only knew that her heart was very sore. Her father walked to his writing-table—opened a letter which he threw down unread, went and shut the door he had left half open, as he came in. Finally he returned to Rhona, and spoke with decision. ‘Rhona, you must trust me, he would not make you happy. In all I care most about for you, he would fail utterly.’

‘Poor Val!’ whispered Rhona, ‘Poor Val!’ She knew now that Val must go away.

‘Would you like to see him?’ Dr. Somerville asked, after a long silence.

‘Yes, father.’

‘Then I will send for him.’

He never asked her what she should say to Val. And his perfect trust made poor Rhona very uncompromising in the sad little interview that followed.

‘Good-bye, Rhona,’ Val said at last, looking at her with sorrowful and perplexed eyes. ‘I suppose it was wrong of

me to want you ; but I don't quite see why. Don't cry, please Rhona. I can't stand it. Perhaps some day your father will forgive us, and give me a chance.'

'It isn't that he is angry,' said Rhona, with a deep sigh, but Val shook his head.

Not till long afterwards did she know that her father saw him again after he had said his last good-bye to her, and that he spoke kindly to him and comforted him ; nor that he and the young man knelt together, while he prayed that God's blessing might go with the sailor. He sent Val away at last with his honest heart full of reverence, and humility, and love, parting from him with a fatherly kiss, just, as he said to his wife, as if the poor boy had been Laurie going back to school.

So Val went to sea with the dim knowledge of something in life deeper, graver, sadder than he had ever dreamt of before. And Rhona soon fell back into her old groove ; yet, through all her father's tenderness and his implied gratitude for her submission, she felt that she had disappointed him. In his eyes she had been too quickly won—caught by mere externals. For a long time afterwards she knew that he distrusted her sympathy in all his great interests. Now and then he offered her what he called 'little snatches of freedom,' which she grew to loathe.

And as her idolatry of him grew ever more complete, it came to pass that a great element of pain entered into her remembrance of Val Fitzhugh. And when the dark cloud of sorrow gathered, she could not bear the memory of that, the one shadow that had come between them, and she never turned back willingly to the moment in her life when she had known that he felt her fail him.

And now they were to meet again at Wildenhall.

No doubt, in his stirring and changeful life, he had long ago forgotten her. At the best she could only have been to him 'the summer pilot of an empty heart, unto the shores of nothing.' She need not be disquieted on his account.

But how had Mr. Mowbray heard of their knowing each other, and, having heard it, for what reason had he asked

Val to the Abbey? Those two questions greatly occupied Rhona, and came between her and her work.

Not that it really mattered—only she did not want Adrian Mowbray to think what was not true—neither he nor any one else, of course. Perhaps after all Val would come and go, be out shooting all day and every day, and never cross her path at all. Her uncle, however, settled that question for her by announcing that on a certain day, and Rhona instantly remembered that it was the day after Val's expected arrival, he had promised to take her to dine at the Abbey—she and Geoffrey were both to go. Rhona was only half-pleased:

'You are always dining at the Abbey, Uncle Dick,' she said, rebelliously.

'Pleasantest house in the neighbourhood, my dear, out and out.'

It was quite true. Neighbour Dick was always dining at the Abbey, and its master was perpetually inviting him. He might not, to all appearances, have much more in common with Mr. Mowbray than had Val Fitzhugh, and yet the two were constantly together. Like many other clever men, Mr. Mowbray accommodated himself readily to his surroundings, and accepted with easy philosophy the company that lay nearest to his hand.

And Dick Heathcote was a devoted friend, far prouder of the Wildenhall property, with its wide farms and famous game preserves, than was its owner. He threw himself into the squire's interests with enthusiasm, knew all the tenants, and was a great deal deeper than Mr. Mowbray in the confidence of old Ashby, the head keeper. On a 'big day' who so eager and important as he? or so elated if the bag exceeded that of his other neighbour, Lord Thetford, by a brace or two of pheasants?

As he, and Rhona, and Geoffrey drove in the misty moonlight through the park, he was full of talk about the day's sport and the relative merits of the guns. 'I was uncommonly glad we had a good day, because of Thetford's coming over. There is a larger party than usual for this shoot. The squire has got two or three political big-wigs,

particular chums of his own, and a couple of foreigners—good chaps enough, but neither of them could hit a haystack to save his life. However, the Grantleys are here again, and a cousin of Lady Helen's—a son of Lord Fitzhugh's—rather a decent shot.'

A cousin of Lady Helen's! Oh, then, it was all right. That accounted for everything. Rhona was greatly comforted. Of course a cousin of Lady Helen's was sure to be welcome at Wildenhall. That made it quite plain, and Rhona entered the long library of the Abbey in much improved spirits.

Before, however, she had been taken to a seat beside Lady Helen, and had talked to her host for a couple of minutes, a distant door was quietly opened, and a young man came up behind Lady Helen's chair and put his hand lightly on her arm.

'Is that you, Val?' she said, and then she turned to Rhona. 'You two are old friends, I think.'

The room was rather dimly lighted. She heard Val Fitzhugh's voice before she saw his face. 'Old friends, indeed,' he echoed, as he clasped her hand.

Lady Helen, pausing on her way to greet a late arrival, and Mr. Mowbray standing with his back to the fire, were both watching the meeting. Rhona wished Val had not spoken in that low, quick voice, and had not held her hand a moment longer than was necessary.

'I say, Val,' interposed one of the group of men scattered about the hearth, 'I appeal to you. Wasn't it before luncheon that we got that first woodcock?—in the covert near the mere, you know.'

Val turned round. 'I don't know. I don't remember,' he answered, vaguely.

'Nonsense, man! you must remember. I was standing at the edge of the carr, don't you recollect?' and so Val was involved in a maze of shooting reminiscences, and Rhona was left to wonder why both Lady Helen and her host had such a curious smile on their faces.

Chance placed her at dinner between the master of the house and a stranger. To her satisfaction, Val Fitzhugh

had been told off to escort a dame of higher degree, and she saw him walking off obediently, in front of her. There was an empty chair left on his other side; when Rhona arrived in the dining-room in her turn, Val made a little sign with his hand towards it, and glanced across at her with a reproachful shake of the head when she turned resolutely to the other side of the table.

How like the Val of old times! They might have been at Clyffe again. 'But was it possible,' she asked herself, 'that he had remained faithful to his old fancy?' She had not believed such constancy to be in him.

Rhona found her neighbour at dinner well informed, and very ready to talk, which was perhaps fortunate, as Adrian Mowbray seldom spoke to her. Once he pointed out to her a man sitting at a little distance, saying, 'You must make acquaintance with my friend Delorme after dinner. He wants to talk to you. You know he painted your father?'

Rhona looked up with quick interest. 'Is that Delorme? Oh yes! His picture is the best that was ever painted of my father!'

'He is a great artist, and a very good fellow.'

'It is a melancholy face,' said Rhona, watching the quick, restless eyes and the expressive mouth.

'Melancholy? Ah well, perhaps! Poor Delorme! Yes, I daresay he never expected to end only as the fashionable portrait-painter of the day!'

'Only?'

'Only—you may well say. I can scarcely imagine anything in art much higher than a fine portrait. But it happened not to be the line of country he aspired to in his dreams—when he had dreams.'

'You cannot mean to say he is a disappointed man—Denis Delorme!'

He laughed. 'I mean to say nothing. I may not be in his secrets. But,' he added, carelessly, 'do you know any man who has reached to middle age, and who is not more or less a disappointed man?'

And, without waiting for an answer, he turned to his

other neighbour, and began describing to her one of his friend's pictures that had attained to fame that year.

Rhona fell into a brown study, trying to puzzle out the question he had proposed to her, and to arraign the people she knew best at the bar of her memory. Was it possible that most of them were disappointed men? Not her father—he had laid down all personal ambition as a willing sacrifice at the feet of his Master. Nor Uncle Dick?—good Uncle Dick, she did not pause on his name. John Mowbray? No, he had never stopped yet to balance the measure of his own failure or success, but was for ever earnest, striving, forgetting these things which were behind, and pressing forward to the mark.

She looked along the table, and her eyes fell on Geoffrey. Poor Geoffrey! Blank darkness had fallen over his life of enterprise at the moment it began to be distinguished. He was an eager runner maimed and blinded at the outset of the race. Judged by her host's standard, he must surely be a sorely disappointed man, and yet none of the faces she could see near him had anything like the grave, sweet expression of resolved content that made his countenance look beautiful to her at that moment. And Val Fitzhugh? He was very young still, and life had smiled on him. It could not have cost him very much to be disappointed of the one poor gift on which for a moment he had seemed to set his heart.

But Mr. Mowbray's speech puzzled her most, as it regarded his own career. He was a successful man, surely—one who had already made his mark. Had he been speaking of himself? She could not tell. His half-mocking words and inscrutable manner baffled curiosity. Would he confess himself disappointed?

And then Rhona had to come back to the present with a start, as she discovered that her instructive neighbour was delivering a neat little essay on Japanese portrait-painting for her sole use and benefit.

After dinner Denis Delorme came and talked to her, first about the deep impression her father's character had made on him, and then about Mr. Mowbray.

He was very outspoken and enthusiastic, and careless of being laughed at. 'I love him dearly,' he said; 'he is a noble fellow; few people know what a friend he can be. I could tell you such stories of the way he has helped poor *confrères* of mine, struggling artists of all sorts. But I hate his cynicism, don't you? It is a thing to shudder at; it is an affectation unworthy of such a man as Mowbray.'

And then Val Fitzhugh came up. 'Why wouldn't you come and sit by me at dinner?'

'Oh, there was such a roaring fire. I was afraid of being melted.'

'Not really?'

It was as if they had parted yesterday. The same commonplace words invested with a sort of attraction by the mere charm of voice; and laugh, and manner. A little gleam of the old light-heartedness came over Rhona, the old lazy brightness of sensation, only now she had a consciousness that it would not last, and that it was not satisfying.

'I thought you were never going to stop talking to Delorme.' As the artist walked away Val drew a chair near to hers.

'Do you like his pictures?' asked Rhona, anxious to keep to safe generalities.

'Delorme's? Oh, I am no judge. Some of them are good. He is very good company himself. I have met him at Grantley. He painted Keith's first wife, you know,' sinking his voice.

Rhona turned to him eagerly.

'Do you mean——'

'The girl this place belonged to. Yes, who met with some dreadful accident on the ice, didn't she?—or her brother was killed, and she died of a broken heart. Her picture is in Keith's room, and he keeps a velvet curtain before it.'

'Oh, what is it like?—do tell me.'

'It's a queer picture, very uncanny somehow. Artistic people think no end of it. She's got a lot of dark fur, wonderfully painted, about her, and a white, shadowy face, with wild sort of eyes that looked straight out at you—mournfully, don't you know.'

‘Beautiful?’

‘Well, I am not sure. I believe Delorme admired her very much; but she must have been a cold, strange-looking woman, and you feel that you can half see through her, as if she was made of ice. It made one shiver to look at her. I say! Before I came here some one told me she walked.’

‘Walked?’

‘Haunted the place, I mean. You meet her ghost at night gliding along the passages. I declare I shan’t half like going to bed.’

‘Nonsense!’ Rhona felt unwarrantably ruffled.

Lady Helen’s cheery, silver laugh came ringing over to them.

‘What a comfort it must have been to Keith to marry Helen after——’

‘Take care,’ interrupted Rhona, as Lady Helen came gaily towards them.

‘Miss Somerville, do you know that the very first day I saw you, Mr. Mowbray promised me that, if I could make up to you enough, I might ask you to play on the organ in the hall.’

‘I say, Helen,’ said Val Fitzhugh, ‘do leave her alone. Nobody wants to hear music just now.’ But Rhona had already risen.

Adrian Mowbray, with Sir Keith Grantley, was standing under the huge stone hood of the fireplace in the hall, and Lady Helen, as she passed, stopped to ask him to desire some one to come and blow for the organ. A curious sort of shade passed over his face, and he glanced quickly at Keith; but he only said, ‘Certainly,’ as he rang the bell.

‘Helen,’ her husband said, following her. ‘Did you say they were going to play the organ?’

‘Miss Somerville is kind enough to say she will.’

He nodded, without speaking; and Rhona, as she took her place at the organ, saw him quietly leave the hall. There was a narrow looking-glass fastened above the desk, in which she saw the hall reflected, with its lofty roof, and stands of armour, and the blazing logs upon the hearth. An open door showed her also a corner of the library, and

the scattered groups of people, Uncle Dick and Lord Thetford, with their heads close together, and Adrian Mowbray standing by himself, where Sir Keith had left him. Then Rhona put her hands down on to the keys, and the great voice of the organ awoke, sweet, powerful, softly modulated. Silence gathered round her as she played. At first she heard footsteps on the stone floor, then everything was still.

Lady Helen sat beside her on the organ bench till Val Fitzhugh came and beckoned her away; but Rhona, engrossed in her music, did not notice that she was left alone. When she paused at last, and turned round, Adrian Mowbray was standing behind her.

'Thank you,' he said, absently.

'It is a beautiful organ,' said Rhona, touching the now silent keys caressingly.

'I am glad to hear it has not lost much by its long silence. It can hardly have been played upon for years! Poor young Ralph was fond of the organ. I believe the last time I heard this one touched was the night before his death.'

He paused. Rhona sat listening breathlessly.

'Yes, he was playing on the last evening of his life, and he,' indicating the place where Keith Grantley had been standing, 'was blowing for him, and his sister—Olga—was sitting in the next room, on that sofa over there, with me.'

'Ralph did not know much of the organ, poor fellow! He sometimes made it groan and wail in a strange way; but he had a natural gift for weaving chords together, and for playing, after his own fashion, any air he had heard. I remember well how that night he wandered about from one thing to another, until at last he went crashing into the "Dead March in Saul." I can hear him now, rolling out the gun-notes as loud as he could, and pulling out the stops like a schoolboy, to make more noise.'

Rhona, listening with her eyes fixed on the key-board, scarcely knew whether Mr. Mowbray was conscious to whom he was talking. He stopped her a moment, and then went on, 'It made her shiver. She had been on the

rack all day long, you know. The first notes of the "Dead March" seemed to fall on her like a blow. I called out to the boy to leave off, but he was making too much noise to hear, and she got up and told me not to disturb him. She was tired, she said, and she would go to bed, and she made me a little sign for good-night, and smiled, and went away through that door.

'The next time I saw her was from the window the next morning, out in the snow. Poor angel!' and then Mr. Mowbray suddenly seemed to see Rhona again, for she felt sure he had forgotten her till then, and had been thinking aloud. 'I give you my word, Miss Somerville, I am as much in love with her to-day as I was that night. God forgive me if I dealt harshly with her. Time never puts her farther from me—she is always here.'

Saying which he turned abruptly and walked away out of the hall. 'Neighbour, don't you want your rubber of whist?' Rhona heard him saying a couple of minutes later.

CHAPTER X

‘The world is full of ruts.’

THE shooting week at the Abbey was over, and most of Adrian Mowbray’s guests were gone; but two or three people lingered on, among them Val Fitzhugh and the artist, Denis Delorme.

Val seemed to have taken up his abode at Wildenhall. It pleased his host apparently to have him there, enlivening the great empty house with his step and whistle, and giving the gamekeepers something to do, to supply him and Laurence Somerville with shooting. Truth to tell, poor Val, the shooting apart, was only too ready to be entreated to remain; the Grange being as the flame round which, mothlike, he loved perpetually to hover, to the grievous singeing of his wings.

His time, thanks to Laurence’s presence and friendship, was pretty evenly divided between the two houses. Dick Heathcote delighted in him—in his cheeriness, and his aptitude for dawdling about the place, and interesting himself about all the live-stock on the farm. Laurence and he shot diligently, and set all the Abbey household to play football. To Rhona’s mother he was gentle and caressing, and with Hilary he speedily struck up a frank, brotherly sort of friendship. She soon found out his secret, which was the most open of all secrets, and was sorry for him, taking the deepest interest in his fortunes. Not that she thought him good enough for Rhona, but that the wistful look in his eyes so touched her kind heart with pity that she did not even grudge his taking her place in many a long ramble with Geoffrey, during which the two sailors were believed to talk endless ‘shop.’

Only Rhona, as by degrees he began to realise, was quietly, kindly, airily unapproachable. Either she was out of the way, hard at work in that unassailable little fortress of hers upstairs, or she was taking care of her mother, or if they were out of doors, Hilary, or Geoffrey, or Laurence was by her side. .

So faithful was he, and unchanging in his devotion, that he was slow to suspect that time had worked a change in Rhona. At first he was only perplexed and grieved at her coldness, without being greatly cast down by it, and in Rhona's heart there was a mixture of impatience and tenderness, of vexation at his persistence, and remorseful kindness, that gave to her manner an air of uncertainty, which he bore with a disarming, manly patience and humility.

He was not suffered either to have his paradise to himself. Denis Delorme had fallen in love with the Grange and its inmates—Rhona and her mother in especial. The picturesque old house with its weather-stains, its soft half-tones of colour and its lingering glory of crimson creeper, was worthy, he alleged, to have been the subject of one of the 'Old Cromes' he found hanging within its walls. Almost daily he came to pay his devotions to those calm, silver-gray, far-shining pictures of the Norfolk broads, and to stand before them, with his hands behind his back, sighing and talking to himself, with a rapt look on his clever, ugly, melancholy face.

Mrs. Somerville also pleased his artistic eye intensely. In the quaint setting of the old panelled rooms he found her absolutely irresistible. Certainly she was more beautiful now than even in her beautiful youth, with a strangely serene and spiritual charm. A look of sweetness had come into her dark, soft eyes, and an air of tender dependence and helplessness hung about her, that impelled most of the people who came near her to protect and caress her. Her long illness, if it had taken something from her, had also brought much to her. She seemed as one withdrawn a little apart from common life, even while caring with gentle interest for the concerns of those about her. But she herself had entered a region of less vivid light than theirs, and

a reposeful atmosphere of subdued twilight wrapped her round.

She sat in her high-backed chair near the fire, and the life of the house went on about her without touching her much, while she was yet in some sort its centre. Her brother kept her surrounded by a wealth of lovely flowers, both in summer and winter. They shared her table with her knitting and her books of devotion.

As she sat there quietly thinking, or reading the daily 'lessons' and prayers that filled up a great portion of her day, all sense of distance from her husband had passed away from her. Nay, he had never before seemed to be so near to her in spirit.

Dick hovered about with pots of eucharis lilies, and delicate tropical ferns, and crimson camellias from his hot-houses. The dogs came and sat on her long black gown, laying their heads upon her knee; and Geoffrey was to be found by the hour leaning against the high chimneypiece, while she read to him in her soft, tranquil voice out of one of her 'good books.'

Nobody brought their worries to her. It was an understood thing that 'the mother' was to be shielded from every disturbing breath. Yet she helped them all by her presence and her peacefulness. It may well be that this peacefulness had been reached through rough waves, and that she remembered a troubled dream which had come to her in the watches of the night; a dream of fever and restlessness, of hopeless seeking, and of utter darkness and separation. But she awoke as from a sleep, and the anguished dream was gone. By her side Rhona had laid her father's Bible, and the wife, remembering all it had been to him, turned to it for comfort, with a simple faith and expectation. Day by day she learnt more in her sorrow, to find its pages full of all she had most missed and wanted—as those ever will whose hearts, approaching the divine book, are as the hearts of little children.

In those days Denis Delorme insisted on painting her picture, and while she sat to him everybody came and went, standing about his easel and listening to his unceasing flow of talk.

'Sir Joshua ought to have painted her. He would have rendered her charm—I am too modern. People don't believe in charm nowadays, Miss Somerville; an old-fashioned gentlewoman, with soft ways and a soft voice, and one or two lovable womanly weaknesses, is thoroughly out of date. A rough manner concealing a deep heart, with amazing strong health and a mission, is the right thing,' said Denis Delorme, painting busily away. 'Had you ever a mission, Mrs. Somerville? No! I thought not.'

A shadow flitted across her face, which his quick eye caught, and he remained silent for a minute pondering its meaning. 'You do not regret it, surely? Pray don't. Give me the strange delightful thing called charm, which is to a woman what the scent is to a rose. When she possesses that she has fulfilled her mission.'

Mr. Delorme was always talking—when not of others, of his own character and feelings. 'I am a very unhappy man, and life has been to me one long deception. I don't deny it—what would be the use? I hate affectation. I am unhappy, but I don't pretend to be a cynic. He does,' pointing to Adrian Mowbray with his brush. 'I am always thinking that life is full of compensation. When any one of my pictures is praised, for example, I am as pleased as a child. Now he would rather die than confess that any one's approval gratified him. I wish he had a little more frank, outspoken, wholesome vanity.'

The painter had compelled his host also, much against the grain, to sit to him. The process bored Adrian Mowbray inexpressibly, and on the subject of costume he was utterly impracticable, refusing alike to be attired after the picturesque fashion of a sportsman, or invested with the loose scholarly garment of a student. 'He has been absolutely unkind. I can do nothing with him,' said Delorme.

'On the contrary, I was most accommodating. I offered to put on my best coat. You have seen my best coat on Sundays, Miss Somerville; an excellent coat, isn't it? and very nearly new.'

'A horrible frock-coat!'

'Or if he liked it better, there is my deputy-lieutenant's uniform.'

'That flaring scarlet thing with silver buttons—and you who call yourself a poet !'

'A poet ! I ? No,' said Adrian, tranquilly ; 'I call myself a gentleman when I have got that coat on.'

'Did you ever come across his early poems, Miss Somerville ?'

Rhona felt the colour coming into her cheeks. Adrian Mowbray stood looking full at her with a half-smile.

'I have seen them,' she said at last.

'And what did you make of them, if I may be allowed to ask ?'

'Rhona used to say they were very fine, once,' said Hilary, blundering in to the rescue. 'She cannot bear them now.'

'Hard lines,' observed Adrian.

'But, Miss Somerville, why don't you like them ?' asked Delorme. 'Don't you think there is something of the true ring in one or two of them ?'

'Don't you ?' retorted Rhona, brought to bay.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Humph. What is it Emerson says of some American poet : "The thyme and the marjoram are not yet honey." But spare his blushes, Miss Somerville, and let us return to my picture.' Adrian had gone across the room to talk to Mrs. Somerville. 'I wish you would speak to him. All this high thinking and plain dressing is—affectation ; he is just like a cabinet minister—a good friend and sitter of mine, who will persist in going to Court in hideous pepper-and-salt volunteer regimentals, though he has the Windsor uniform to wear if he likes, which is rather picturesque than the reverse.'

Rhona laughed.

'Those two women,' said Denis Delorme as he and his friend walked home together, 'have both got that rare attraction—an atmosphere of their own. Do you know what I mean ?'

'Well—dimly.'

'There is something distinctive about them—their articulation, and their gestures, and their way of moving, is peculiar to themselves. They make a clear-cut impression on one's mind. I wish you would marry Rhona Somerville, Adrian!'

'How can you say so, with poor Val Fitzhugh's plight before your eyes?'

'Poor Val Fitzhugh never had the ghost of a chance—you know that well enough.'

'I have been told that she has liked him for a long time past.'

'She may possibly have liked him when she was in the nursery. No, Adrian, seriously, it is my great hope for you.'

'Hope is a fatigue ending in a deception,' quoted Adrian, sententiously.

Val Fitzhugh himself was beginning to find that there was some truth in that melancholy little maxim of the Queen of Roumania's. He was getting tired of living upon hope. Patience was all very well—but was he never to get her to himself? Ever since they first met he had been vainly longing to express to Rhona his sympathy with her grief for her father's loss. At last, one afternoon, Hilary left them alone together in the library at the Grange.

'He is going to row me over in the boat, Rhona,' she said, breathlessly, 'that I may get home before post time. Mr. Heathcote has a letter he wants grandfather to write—and you are coming, Rhona, and he will row you back. But I must get the letter first, for we have not a moment to lose,' and she rushed away.

Val thought that Rhona looked sad, and he plunged awkwardly and suddenly into the condolence that had been long burning in his heart.

'I was so awfully sorry for you when I heard it,' he said, presently.

'Thank you,' she answered, in a low voice.

She sat with her arms crossed over an open book, looking up at him. Val hoped that she would say something to

help him on ; but her eyes sank to the page before her, and she said no more.

'It is so hard to see any one you care for die,' he went on, presently. 'There was a great friend of mine, quite a young fellow, died when we were lying off Malta last summer. I was with him while he was dying. It was awfully sad. I never felt so sorry for anybody in my life !'

'I was not sorry for my father,' answered Rhona, quickly. 'Oh no ! I was only sorry for myself. I knew how glad he must be.'

'Glad !'

The tone was one of such unmixed wonder that Rhona felt it was impossible to explain her meaning. He would never understand.

'Did you actually think that he was glad ?' asked Val.

'I know he was !'

'Not really ?'

That old expression of his again ! It carried her back to former days with an odd force of association and a rush of tenderness. She answered gently, 'He loved God very much, and then there was so very much he wished to know.'

'What kind of things ?'

She looked at him, and made no answer.

'But he must have hated leaving you,' said Val, looking at her.

Rhona raised her eyes again with a smile. 'He had been very happy. He loved us very much, and he loved his work. But, when he died, I was not sorry for him. I only thought how his love and his curiosity—his longing to know—were both satisfied.'

'His curiosity—what a very odd thing to think of !'

'Is it odd ? Perhaps——' and again Rhona felt how little he could understand her.

'But it must have been an awful shock to you ?' said Val.

'Yes ; but one soon gets accustomed to that.'

He stared at her in renewed surprise.

'Oh no !' she repeated, 'it is not the shock that any one need dread in a great sorrow. It is wonderful how

soon the newness and the strangeness go off, and you feel as if it must have always been so. Look here, did you ever read "Dream Children?"

'Not I. What is it? A poem?'

'One of Elia's essays.'

Val tried to look enlightened.

'It is this book which I was reading when you came. Charles Lamb knew very well what I mean. Listen,'—and she read the words: 'And how when he died, though he had not been dead an hour, it seemed as if he had died a great while ago, such a great distance there is betwixt life and death; and how I bore his death pretty well, as I thought at first, but how afterwards it haunted and haunted me——'

Rhona's voice gave way, and Val, standing at the window and looking down the long grass walk in the garden, was vexed to see Hilary running towards them from the sun-dial. He had not made much way with Rhona, perhaps; but there was something encouraging in being there with her alone, and in her reading to him words that clearly went very near her heart.

'I am late, Rhona,' said Hilary, appearing at the window. 'Did you think I was never coming?' and then catching sight suddenly of Rhona's face and of Val looking at her with an expression of reproach, she paused suddenly and half turned round, as if she meditated running away again.

'No, no, Hilary. Stay, we are ready. We were only waiting for you,' and Rhona snatched up her hat in a great hurry. Val followed her silently. It was very tiresome to be interrupted; but, after all, he had been a little confused between Charles Lamb and Elia; and, as they crossed the mere, he could think about what Rhona had been saying, and be ready to talk to her as he rowed her back—he and she alone together. So he went forward with alacrity to get the boat ready. But as she reached the boathouse, Rhona drew back with a sudden reluctance, remembering that when they had landed Hilary she would have to cross back alone with him. She did not want Val to talk to her just now.

'Are you not coming?' he asked, dismayed, as she turned away, and bade Hilary good-bye.

'Oh, Rhona, you must come.'

'Not this evening, Hilary, thank you. Don't be late with your letters. Good-bye.'

'I say, do come,' Val entreated in a low voice, standing with one foot in the boat, and looking up imploringly. 'I will take great care of you. If I am good for nothing else, I can look after a boat.'

'I am sure of that,' said Rhona, smiling, but she still shook her head.

Val did not urge her. He said no more, but pushed off the boat silently and left her standing on the little landing-place, looking after him with a face full of shyness, and gentleness, and regret.

Hilary also, as she steered the boat towards the Hithersea side of the mere, kept on glancing with a great pity at the handsome, sad, perplexed young face opposite to her, which looked as if it was meant by nature only to express happiness.

It was against her creed to allow, even in her inmost thoughts, that Rhona could do wrong; and yet it seemed as if she must have been cruel to bring such an expression into Val Fitzhugh's brown eyes.

'I thought she was coming, didn't you?' he said at last. 'She might have trusted herself to me in the boat—at least I understand all about boats.'

'Poor fellow!' said Hilary, much too blunt and unsophisticated for the sort of refined sympathy that would have affected to ignore and misunderstand his distress. It is just possible, though, that such sympathy would have been altogether too ethereal to do Val any good. He liked Hilary's frank, outspoken pity, and was grateful for it.

'She used to like me once,' he went on, 'she really did—I'm quite sure of it, so I can't make out why everything is changed. You can't think how awfully glad I was to come here and see her. Helen Grantley begged Mowbray to invite me. I wish he hadn't now, for I don't think she half likes my being here, somehow.'

‘Poor fellow!’ repeated Hilary, looking at him with honest, compassionate eyes.

‘I suppose she was not grown up when I knew her before,’ he went on, after he had brought the boat out mechanically into the middle of the mere, ‘not quite grown up, and so I suited her better. I was more up to her mark, you see.’

‘Yes!’ and Hilary nodded gravely, as if there was something after all in what he said.

‘We used to have great fun when she was at Clyffe. I don’t think she cares about fun now, at least not my sort—but she liked it then. And besides, though she never said so, I fancied she was very dull at her home. She was too good, of course, to tell me so; but you find things out when you are as fond of any one as I am of her.’

‘Of course,’ assented Hilary.

‘And so—— But the old don, her father, would not have anything to say to me. Mind, I don’t say he was wrong, I was not half good enough for her, I know that, and he was a real good man if ever there was one.’ He paused a moment, and looked down thoughtfully at his oar. ‘And then, I suppose,’ with a great sigh, ‘that after I went to sea he set her on to read books—sermons, you know, and Divinity, and all that. Why, only to-day she was quoting Elia. Did you ever read Elia?’

‘No, not likely.’

‘Well, she knows his book by heart. I daresay he was a bishop. I wish I had taken Orders, instead of going into the Navy and knocking about without ever having a chance of reading. My father gave each of us our choice of a profession, and, of course, I chose the Navy, like an ignorant young blockhead as I was. Do you think it would have made much difference?’

There was no getting flattering unction out of Hilary. ‘Oh dear, no,’ she said. ‘No difference at all. Curates are very stupid sometimes. Rhona would not have looked at you a bit the more.’

‘Just so,’ he answered, humbly, and he bent his head down over his oar.

'She was sorry for me just now, Miss Marston. I saw it in her eyes, but that was all. I didn't want her to be sorry.—Did you ever see such lovely eyes as hers?'

'No, never.'

'And such a gentle voice—and so good. Do you think perhaps she will like me again; if I am patient? I don't think I need go away just yet, do you?'

Rhona meanwhile had turned back slowly and rather sadly to the house. Val was right. She was very sorry for him, and the sense of having been unkind weighed on her. It had hardly seemed worth while to refuse such a little thing as allowing him to row her across the mere, when he wished it so much, and yet she was glad she had not done so. Very likely they would have fallen in with some of the shooters on the other side—Mr. Mowbray himself, for instance, and she did not wish him to misunderstand her—neither he nor any one else.

Val's devotion oppressed her—she could no longer hide it from herself. What was it which had so changed her? Val, with all his *insouciance* and apparent heedlessness, was the one who had remained faithful, not she. And he still had the same charm which had attracted her so much of old—she felt it keenly still. She said to herself that she really loved Val; yet what he wanted she could not give him now. He was so young—life seemed to have stood still with him.

Her father, in sending him away, had judged for her with all his wonted wisdom. How well he must have known her, since it was no longer, she owned, the remembrance of his wishes which stood between them. On the contrary, Val's steadiness of purpose would have won him respect in her father's eyes. He had once said to her that if she and Val remained faithful to one another, he should have no right to keep them apart for ever. His saying so had filled her with gay hopes then; she had longed to be able to tell Val. She recalled the words: 'You would have earned a claim to take your own way, Rhona, if you remained steadfast to your wish—and if Val Fitzhugh came back.'

But the Val Fitzhughs of life do not come back. Some one else comes bearing the same name; but that is not the same thing. The past returns no more. The Val to whom Rhona's fancy had been first given had returned to her, himself unaltered, but where was the old glow of glad companionship? Gone, hopelessly gone!—the glamour that dazzled her eyes once.

She knew all that lay behind the charming, frank laugh, and lazy, caressing manner; knew that the nature was kind, loyal, faithful, even beyond her former conception of it, easily contented, and unstirred by the restlessness of ambition. Yet now she quickly wearied of his simple talk, and longed after a wider grasp of thought, a character less easily read, something that appealed more to the imagination. She could not have put down in black and white what it was that she so keenly felt was wanting—the hearing of some sentence that puzzled her and made her think—a sense of power held in reserve—the silence that comes from strength. She missed even the provocation of some baffling, two-edged bit of cynicism, that left her disappointed and restless, with a sense of standing outside the gate of a thought-sanctuary, wherein were stored many treasures she would fain be permitted to see, but the key of which was purposely and mockingly withheld.

Ever since the day she had played the organ at Wildenhall, and Mr. Mowbray had spoken to her so unexpectedly about Olga, she had been unconsciously watching him and thinking about him.

Quiet as his voice and manner had then been, simple and little removed from commonplace as were his words, they had conveyed to her a strange impression of strong passion and pain. They stilled more than they excited her at the moment, so great was her consciousness of his intensity of feeling. She knew that she had seen Adrian Mowbray, for those few minutes as he really was. When next he met her, it was 'with his visor down' and his wonted indifference of manner, but she fancied she should never again care for any outward expression of feeling from him. For the future she should know how to trust him without words.

In that she was mistaken ; for as time passed on, and he was always the same—courteous and friendly—more or less distant, civil, but sarcastic—she grew impatient, and longed to surprise him into some fresh revelation of his inner self. She wished to encounter him in fair fight, and chafed against the cool, misleading manner which it had become second nature to him to summon to his aid.

And so poor Val's open-hearted devotion seemed by the force of contrast a little too transparent ; his unconcealed eagerness and constancy often ruffled her ; his little mortifications and downcast looks, together with his readiness to receive pity and encouragement from outside, made her impatient with him, her real liking notwithstanding.

Rhona retreated more and more into her study upstairs, and Val roamed about the lower rooms disconsolate. Sometimes she wished with her whole heart that he, and his host, and Denis Delorme, would all take it into their heads to go away from Wildenhall, and leave her free to concentrate her thoughts upon her work. She had not fully grappled with it yet—and here was the Dean of Morechester writing to propose coming to the Grange, on a visit of inspection !

Rhona was unprepared to meet him. Try as she would, an overpowering mixture of awe and loving reverence kept her hovering on the borders of her undertaking, instead of making that bold plunge that must needs precede the 'steady progress' her mentor wrote that he hoped to find her making. Against her will, she was distracted by the view from the window of Val wandering forlornly about the garden walks, and by the sound of Denis Delorme's voice as he painted in the hall.

Still the dean's visit inexorably approached. Mrs. Venables was to accompany him, and Dick Heathcote, slightly oppressed by the prospect, had insisted on Mr. Mowbray, with his two friends, dining at the Grange the first evening—'like good fellows, to help us out with the very reverend.'

Mrs. Venables was a woman of strong intellect, and stronger memory—a serious woman—well read, better

informed, and who never forgot any one. She had a widely extended circle of friends, and was blessed with a singular knack of discovering links and associations between herself and every stranger she chanced to meet. Sometimes the links were of the frailest; but each one sufficed for a date or a reminiscence. Though Laurence and Rhona were both fond of her in a certain way, they looked forward with mischievous pleasure to seeing their friends brought face to face with Mrs. Venables's celebrated memory.

'But she never heard of me,' said Val Fitzhugh.

'Don't you flatter yourself,' answered Laurence.

Sure enough—'Fitzhugh!' said Mrs. Venables, catching the name as they gathered before dinner in the hall. 'The name is familiar to me—a son of Lord Fitzhugh. I should like to see the young man.'

Val was brought up and made his bow.

She looked at him with a smile that was sadder than a sigh. 'The world is small indeed. I knew your father well at Brighton, in '56. My own dear father was alive and with me then.'

The melancholy gray eyes that were fixed on Val demanded a reply; but there was none forthcoming.

Val was not often at a loss, but he shuffled now hopelessly with his feet, and could think of nothing to say.

'I remember that your poor mother and I had a correspondence—about a housemaid. My cook happened to have a sister to recommend, most respectable. I daresay you are too young to remember her at Clyffe Castle—Jane Carter?'

Val's memory was a blank.

Mrs. Venables smiled grimly. 'She was there for seven years, greatly valued, I believe. Afterwards, Mr. Heathcote, she came into this county as head housemaid at Lord Thetford's.'

Mr. Heathcote rubbed his hands. 'Ah, I daresay. Thetford has a lot of housemaids, I know—'

But Mrs. Venables had not done with Val. 'So, you see, it is interesting to me to meet an old friend's son. Your mother lost a dear infant in '67.'

'Not really?' ejaculated Val, fairly bewildered.

'You did not know it? February, '67.'

He looked round wildly in hopes of some diversion. Rhona and Laurence were watching him, with serious faces. Laurence nodded to him. 'I did not remember the exact date. I was at sea—at school——'

'Teething,' she said, with a deep sigh.

'Poor little beggar!' murmured Val.

'But this is tremendous,' whispered Mr. Delorme to Rhona. 'However, thank goodness, my family is an obscure one.'

'Then you shall sit next her at dinner,' returned Rhona.

Mrs. Venables was ready for him.

'Mr. Delorme, the painter?'

He bowed. 'It is curious we should meet here. I was looking over a catalogue of your works only a few days ago, Mr. Delorme. You have painted no less than five intimate friends of my own within the last few years.'

'It gives me pleasure to hear it.'

'They are dead,' said Mrs. Venables, looking sideways at him. 'I have felt their deaths deeply. I counted that ten of your sitters have died since the Royal Academy of '70, whom I knew well by name.—You painted Mrs. Paul Horton?'

'Mrs. Paul Horton? I believe I did. Yes, many years ago.'

'We were girls together.'

A pause, during which Mr. Heathcote was heard instructing the company about cottage flower-shows. The Gloire de Dijon roses were again adorning the table, as Rhona remembered them when she first came to Wildenhall more than a year ago. Reynolds's name was on his master's lips.

'You know young Paul is married?' said Mrs. Venables.

'Young Paul?'

'Paul Horton, the eldest son, a most promising young man at the Bar. He married one of the Clayton-Seymours—connections of the dean's—they spent their honeymoon in Rome last winter.—You were at Rome last winter, Mr. Mowbray?' turning on him suddenly.

Adrian admitted the correctness of her information. 'I am in Rome whenever I can get there.'

'You met a dear friend of mine there—Archdeacon Baxter. He read many of your articles after meeting you—with some pain, I regret to say.'

'Impossible, surely!'

'You have seen his refutation of your views on "Unauthorised Tradition." No? Masterly! most conclusive! I brought the volume with me here, thinking it more than probable that we might meet, and that it would be of service to you.'

'You are too good.'

'I was naturally interested in you, knowing your connection with this place; for the sake of the dear Somervilles. And in former days your grandmother, Lady Gertrude Mowbray, and I, had the same doctor for a time. I heard much of her from him. We were suffering in the same way, and he was of great use to us—Dr. Pottinger. Do you recall the name? I think it was in the year '74.'

'I was abroad in '74.'

'He was a remarkable man. I kept up with the Pottingers, out of gratitude, for many years. George Pottinger, the second boy, used to spend his vacations with us at Morechester. You knew him, Laurence, at the deanery?'

'Intimately,' said Laurence, remembering the fearful and wonderful scrapes into which he used to entice the unwary Pottinger.

'Then you will regret to hear that he has failed in his examination for Sandhurst.'

'Poor George! He was always rather a duffer at Latin and Greek.'

'It was of the last importance that he should pass. There are no less than five sons, Mr. Mowbray, to be provided for in these difficult times. The eldest is doing well in his father's profession; then comes George; the two youngest are at Marlborough; and Algernon I have been enabled to be the means of helping, through an old and valued friend and neighbour, whom you probably know—Lord St. Dunstan.'

‘Yes, I know Lord St. Dunstan.’

‘Have you seen him since his late trial? I have felt for him most acutely. You have not heard? My dear Mr. Mowbray, last November—is it possible? Poor Lady St. Dunstan!—and he left a widower with that one delicate girl. He has taken her to Algiers—too late, I fear. They call it throat—but it is chest, Mr. Mowbray—distinctly chest.’

After dinner the dean came and seated himself beside Rhona.

‘Well, Rhona, my love, and how are we getting on? Not quite so rapidly, I fear, as we could wish, eh?’

Mr. Mowbray was standing within hearing, and manifestly listening. Rhona hoped he would go away; but he was indiscretion personified, and kept his ground steadily.

She looked up at the dean with a wistful, imploring little smile.

‘Making due allowance for youthful distractions,’ he resumed, ‘I cannot but feel that we ought to be making some definite progress now.’

‘Yes, yes, I know; I know I ought,’ said Rhona, tearing the lace off her pocket-handkerchief.

‘And what is the obstacle? I do not doubt your good will, my dear young friend; but perseverance, Rhona; perseverance!’

‘I cannot satisfy myself,’ she said in a very low voice; ‘nothing seems good enough.’

‘There is a safeguard in self-distrust, but we must not carry it to the pitch of morbid self-depreciation. We must not be hypercritical. Be painstaking, be straightforward, and, above all, be accurate, and you cannot go very far wrong. You and I must have a little serious talk to-morrow.’

‘Yes,’ said Rhona, ‘to-morrow.’

‘It is like having a picture to paint. Ask your distinguished friend, Mr. Delorme, how he sets to work. Mix your colours carefully, as it were—make your sketch very correctly, and then dip your brush in the colour, and begin to paint, boldly, you know, and yet with minute fidelity.’

Rhona gave a sigh.

'Putting metaphor on one side, we need only detailed and luminous narrative, connecting together your dear father's own remarkable correspondence, with a characteristic anecdote thrown in now and again; not omitting an occasional humorous touch, or playful illustration, for we must eschew dulness—and—and, there you have him.'

Involuntarily Rhona lifted her eyes to Adrian Mowbray's face. If there was any appeal in them, she was utterly unconscious of it; but he read an entreaty for help in her glance, and a mixture of *désespoir* and amusement. He came to the front instantly.

'Ah, here we have an authority,' said the dean, turning to him benevolently. 'Did you ever attempt biography, Mr. Mowbray?'

'Don't you think that biographies in general are mistakes?' he asked, composedly.

The dean was taken thoroughly aback.

'My good sir!' he exclaimed, holding up his hands.

'I may be wrong; but if I had my way, no man's life should ever be written till he had been dead a hundred years. Your contemporary biographies are a delusion. You cannot get at the real truth in much less than a century.'

'My good sir!' again exclaimed the dean.

'I feel as if I were leaving you defenceless in the jaws of the lion,' said Adrian Mowbray, as he shook hands with her an hour later.

Rhona coloured and laughed. 'Oh, I don't mind the lion when I have him to myself.'

'You are quite sure?'

'Quite sure.—You know you ought not to have listened.'

'Of course not. But the advice was so valuable. Your difficulties all seemed to be vanishing away.'

He stood still for a minute looking at her. 'Then I can be of no use?'

'Of none whatever!'

He bowed, said 'Good-night,' and departed, leaving Rhona so unaccountably light of heart as actually to enjoy the narration of a strange train of coincidences, whereby Mrs. Venables had been enabled to trace, in the new clerk of the works for the Cathedral restoration, a brother-in-law of a music-mistress who once gave the dean's nieces lessons in Edinburgh

CHAPTER XI

‘To win or lose.’

CHRISTMAS was drawing near. Everybody said that Adrian Mowbray had never been known to spend Christmas at Wildenhall, had never remained, indeed, after the first snow fell.

So he would soon be going away. Well, he would carry with him some pleasures, many perplexities, a little of the salt of life, and Val Fitzhugh.

Dénis Delorme had already departed, with many affectionate farewells, with Mrs. Somerville's lovely portrait in a deal box, and with *sans adieu* upon his lips. He should be back in a month or two, he hoped. Why did he go now? Why, because he was, by nature, a rolling stone which gathered no moss; because he never did what he liked by any chance; and because his Christmas, after a country-house visit or two, had long been promised to a friend, an artist with a sick wife, who had settled himself near Cape Finisterre for the winter. ‘So the long Atlantic rollers will sing me my Christmas carols.’

‘I ought to be going too, you know, oughtn't I?’ said Val Fitzhugh. ‘Come now, dear old Geoffrey, wouldn't it be better?’

‘That depends.’

‘It don't depend on me,’ said Val, inconsequently. ‘If she said “Stay,” nothing would induce me to turn out.’

‘Then ask her to say “Stay.”’

‘And lose my last hope. You counsel that?’

““ He either fears his fate too much——””

quoted Geoffrey with great originality.

““ Or his deserts are small——””

I know those lines—about the only poetry I do know. I say them over every morning while I am dressing, and make up my mind to “put it to the touch,” and then Mowbray says, “Better remain on until I go,” and I put off again. It’s quite true—I do fear my fate. I have grown afraid of her, that’s what is such hard lines.’

‘Nonsense.’

‘It isn’t nonsense. I used not to be afraid of her, when we climbed about the cliffs at home, and when I taught her to play billiards on the old table that had been sent upstairs to our passage, out of the way, because no one would play on it. She did not seem so much above me then. But now I should never dare ask her to come and play billiards in the boys’ passage on a rubbishing old table without cushions. When I see her coming in with her sweet, grave face, and her low voice, and that—that—noble way of hers, don’t you know?—I give you my word, I’m such a fool, the room begins to go spinning round. I say, old Geoffrey, couldn’t you put in a word for me, just to pave the way?’

‘You had much better speak for yourself.’

‘So I will, afterwards. But just you tell her I have something I must say to her. It would be a shame to take her by surprise, and I am awfully afraid she thinks I understand her, and am content to go away without an answer. I won’t speak to her, if she really thinks I am bound in honour to say nothing; only I must be sure, and I sometimes think I might manage to bring her round if I had a chance.’

‘So do I,’ said Geoffrey, giving his arm a friendly pat. ‘Well, Val, I can tell her, if you like, that she is bound to give you a fair hearing. ‘There can be no harm in that!’

‘But she isn’t bound!’ cried Val, anxiously. ‘I won’t have her talked over against her will. It would be a pure act of grace on her part if she would not mind listening.

Not that it will do any good—I know that beforehand,’ relapsing into despondency. ‘Oh dear, to think how sure I made of her before I arrived here, and what an ass I must have been! But you can tell her how down on my luck I am now.’

‘Never mind what I tell her. Something I undertake to say this very afternoon.’

So Geoffrey ordered his niece to go out with him after luncheon, though it was horribly damp, and the lanes presented an uninviting compound of mud and thin ice. And before he let her escape, he gave her a piece of his mind, with a bluntness that would have dismayed and astonished Val. A diplomatic mission is not always carried out with the delicate precautions that have been dictated to the ambassador. Val’s chivalry would have been up in arms at Geoffrey’s plain speaking.

He and Rhona were coming home through the farmyard, when they fell in with Val himself, trying to while away his time of suspense with Uncle Dick and Hilary.

The short winter’s day was closing in, the fog rising, the red sun fast disappearing behind the trees. It was milking time. Dick Heathcote’s herd of shorthorns—Roseleaf, Dolly, Princess, Ruby, Blossom, Lady Fair, and the rest, were meekly marching into their stalls, in careful order of precedence. The frosty air was sweet with their fragrant breath. There was a pleasant clatter of milk pails, and Hilary, armed with a big china mug, called to Rhona to come and drink some of the fresh, warm milk. Rhona following her, and rather anxious to escape her uncle’s lecture, was pulled aside by him into a sort of shed filled with hay, and told to sit down on one of the prickly perfumy heaps.

Geoffrey had not done with her.

‘You may go farther and fare worse, Rhona, I can tell you.’

‘Oh yes, I know it well,’ said Rhona, humbly.

‘You are offered a good, honest, straightforward affection. Is that to be counted as nothing? There is something even chivalrous about the lad!’

'Poor good Val!' she said, softly.

'He claims a fair hearing from you, at all events; and you owe it to him.'

'Yes, only I hoped he understood already. Surely he must. Cannot you tell him, Geoffrey, and spare us both?'

'He will take his sentence better from you.'

'Very well, if you think so.'

'Only mind you consider well before you give it. Women like you don't half realise the value of what they put aside so lightly.'

'Indeed I think I do realise it,' she said, sadly. 'It makes me very unhappy.'

'You cannot care for him then? It is a pity. These simple, easy-going, cheery people are sometimes capable of a deep attachment. Poor boy, you can give him nothing? He gives you all he has.'

Rhona, half stifled with the stuffy sweetness of the hay, full of compunction on Val's account, and worried with Geoffrey's reproaches, did not know what to answer. It was an odd place for confidences. . . The pails clattered within, the cows were to be heard munching, munching monotonously, with their suppers in the mangers before them. Hilary had got possession of a milking stool and was milking and singing, with her head pressed against gentle Blossom's side. Uncle Dick, loud and dogmatic, was impressing Val with the vast superiority of shorthorns over Alderneys.

'I do not say I blame you,' began Geoffrey, returning to the charge, 'only that it is a pity. To have a strong and deep affection, such as his, thrown back on him, is a bad thing for a man of his age. I am sorry for him.'

'Oh, I wish I could want to marry him!' sighed Rhona.

'Well—if you could——' eagerly.

'But I can't!'

'You can't? Then it is all up! I don't understand you, Rhona. I do not pretend that he is intellectual or brilliant, far from it; but there are other qualities more important than those, by far. Is it not possible to worship

intellect too much? With great learning and knowledge does there never come any coolness, any sceptical impatience of the old, homely ways of thought? Take care what you are about, Rhona.'

'It was my father who sent him away,' said Rhona.

'Yes, so Val told me. But that was years ago, when he was quite a boy. I cannot help thinking your father would sooner have seen you married in the long run to a brave, honest, simple-hearted fellow like Val Fitzhugh, than to one of your cynical, modern free-thinkers, who vote themselves too clever for the faith their fathers and mothers lived and died in.'

Rhona looked up startled.

'My father had great sympathy with doubt——' she began, and then she faltered and stopped.

'Rhona!' her uncle said, sternly, 'do you mean that he would have suffered your faith to be tampered with? Do you know what you are saying? Take care! You are treading on dangerous ground.'

He was speaking in a general way, and did not intend his words to have any special application. He could not see the sudden tide of crimson that dyed Rhona's cheeks. He heard a quick, half-caught breath, but it told him nothing. He did not know that his arrow had gone home. His words gave Rhona a swift shock; they came to her like a revelation, a sort of awakening, a strange thrill that had in it both terror and exultation.

As they presently went back to the house in company, it was not of Val, walking silently by her side, that she thought; and yet when they came into the hall, and Geoffrey said to him in a low voice, 'She knows you wish to have a talk with her,' the quickening and stirring of all her feelings made her hold out her hand to him impulsively. He bent down quietly and kissed it, then kept it in his own, and they passed out of the hall together, hand in hand.

Geoffrey and Hilary remained standing beside the smouldering wood fire. Geoffrey stirred the logs with his foot, and tall, leaping flames shot up, and showed the dark

corners of the hall, and the oak rafters in the roof, and his own troubled face. Hilary wondered to see it so full of anxiety and pain.

'Poor Val!' Geoffrey said once or twice. 'How will he bear it? He must surely have known how it would end. Will it be a very heavy blow?'

At last Val reappeared, after what seemed a long half-hour of waiting. He would have crossed the hall and gone away without seeing them, if Geoffrey had not called him. He stopped short then, and came up to the fireside and wrung the hand Geoffrey held out to him, but he only said, 'Good-night.'

If Geoffrey could have seen his face, he would have asked no questions, but he was very anxious, and he could not resist saying: 'Well, Val?'

'She is an angel, that's all!' and Val leant his arm against the high chimneypiece, and put his head down on it.

Geoffrey did not disturb him with consolations, far less with any further question, for which indeed there was no need. The story was told plainly enough. Hilary wondered again at the vivid sympathy she read on Geoffrey's face.

Val was the first to speak.

'Ah well,' he said, lifting up his head, 'so there's an end of that. I shall get afloat as soon as I can; there's nothing like the sea after all, is there, old Geoffrey? And a sailor has no business with a wife, I have always been told; so it's all for the best, I daresay.'

It did not need Geoffrey's keen sense of hearing and quickness of perception to know that the young man's composure was sorely put to the proof, and that he was trying his utmost to appear manly and philosophical.

'It must be borne, Val,' he said, answering not the words, but the tone.

'To be sure. Oh yes, of course it must be borne.'

'And, as you say, it is no doubt for the best.'

'Only it spoils one's life.'

'You must not let it spoil your life.'

'I know. It's easy talking.'

'That is true.'

Geoffrey stroked his beard and was silent. Talking was not his *métier*, and he so realised Val's trouble that he could not find anything to comfort him with.

'That is the sort of way people always talk——' said Val, working himself up into indignation, 'people who have never felt. 'It must be borne with patiently!' If they knew what it is like, they would not be so ready with their philosophy, perhaps.'

Geoffrey coloured. 'Quite true,' he said again.

'Quite true,' echoed Val, 'and yet the people who say, "Quite true," are the very first to preach. One is to take things as they come, and make the best of them, or else to be voted weak-minded, or rebellious, or something.'

'All the same, things have to be borne,' said Geoffrey, very low.

'Who doubts it? There's no fighting against fate. One must take one's chance with the rest. All I wish, for my part, is to be let alone. It isn't much to ask to be allowed to go under quietly, if the luck goes against you, without being crammed with good advice.'

Geoffrey pondered, and then returned doggedly to the charge. 'You must not waste your life because of this.'

'What's to hinder me if I choose to waste it? Who cares? Not——' and he pointed gloomily towards the room where he had left Rhona.

'I care,' said Geoffrey.

Val shrugged his shoulders and was silent.

'I daresay you think my caring matters very little one way or another——'

'Not that. I'm much obliged, of course, but I don't think you know what you are talking of. No one can until they have gone through——'

His voice broke in a miserable little sob, which he tried uselessly to disguise by clearing his throat vehemently.

'Val,' Geoffrey said, with a sudden change of manner, 'I do know, I have felt—I am not speaking ignorantly. God knows, I know only too well.' He put his hand on the other's shoulder. 'My boy, few can know better than I

how it hurts to waste all your love, and to have no love given in return.'

'Geoffrey!' broke involuntarily from Hilary.

'I let it ruin me—don't do that, Val. I gave in under it, and made no fight. They thought that the loss of my sight was my chief trouble. How little they guessed!'

He bent down his head, and spoke with such a concentration of grief and bitterness that Val looked at him, fairly arrested for the moment, and won from his own cares.

Neither thought of Hilary standing by, her startled eyes fixed on Geoffrey, her face blanched with sudden jealousy and anger. They took no notice of her choking cry, 'Oh, Geoffrey!'

'I loved her better than my life,' he said, 'and she would not care for me—not one bit—not one bit.'

The brief anger faded out of Hilary's face; it grew soft with compassion and pitying tenderness. She took his hand. 'She must have cared for you, captain.'

'No child, never; never.'

'But did she know how fond you were of her?'

'Know it? Oh yes, she knew.' He drew a long breath. 'For three years she was engaged to me, and then she married some one else.'

'Then she was a wicked, cruel woman,' the girl said, hurriedly.

He gripped her arm. 'Hilary, be silent—how dare you? What can you know about it? She is dead; long ago it was all over. Her life was very sad—very hard. She is dead.'

'Oh, poor Geoffrey! Poor Geoffrey!'

The intense feeling and emotion seemed to have changed hands. Val stood by silent, his trouble became for the moment a secondary thing—the two deeper natures, with their stronger power of feeling, had thrown it into the shade.

'No,' said Geoffrey, answering Hilary's exclamation, 'do not pity me—I am glad to think of her at rest. The torture was to know she was unhappy, and to be blind and helpless here. She needs no help of mine now.'

There are some accents that linger on the ear and will

not let themselves be forgotten. Hilary never lost the impression of those words of Geoffrey's—he who was usually so equable, and so silent about himself—he whom everybody compassionated for the sad misfortune of his blindness, but whose quiet endurance and content had long ago justified his brother's boast that 'Geoffrey was always cheerful.'

Hilary had made him her ideal—people who spoke much about themselves, who found fault with that state of life to which it had pleased God to call them, who were querulous, impatient, or garrulous, were tried by Geoffrey's standard and found wanting. But now the very foundations of her world seemed to be giving way beneath her feet. Geoffrey unhappy! Geoffrey bearing in silence a lifelong sorrow, faithful to a love that was nearer his heart than any other feeling! Geoffrey, her quiet, rugged, silent hero, loving, with all his strength of love, the memory of a stranger whose name she had never even heard; he, the even tenor of whose daily life, with its unselfish thought for others, and its calm likings, she had felt so sure of knowing all about. Instead of that, his existence for years past had been filled full of a passion of regret that she had never dreamt of.

Impulsive always, and impatient of suffering, she followed the instinct that bade her escape if she could from all this strangeness and pain. She left his side suddenly and ran across the hall. The fresh air of heaven was always her best helper, whether it folded her, as now, in damp and darkness, or met her with balmy breaths of softness and fragrance. As she flung open the hall door, she came full on Mr. Heathcote, elaborately scraping the half-frozen mud off his farming boots in the porch.

'Hallo, Hilary, where are you off to now?' as in her hurry she nearly tumbled over him.

'Home,' she said, briefly.

'Home! Nonsense. Why, the archdeacon is coming to fetch you in half a minute. He is only talking to Mrs. Bloomfield about Widow Sage's daughter—girl wants a place, or something or another. I heard Mrs. Bloomfield at it

hammer and tongs ; but she can't have much more to say. Come in here,' and he threw open the door of a side passage that led to his own den.

The wainscotted, firelit room looked delightfully snug and commonplace, with its country gentleman's litter and its haunting flavour of tobacco. Hilary was very much at home there ; it somehow comforted her to see Geoffrey's violoncello standing in its wonted corner, and *The Old Red Sandstone*, which she had been reading to him only yesterday, still lying on the window-ledge where she had left it. Everything bore the stamp of that tranquil everyday life, from which it seemed to Hilary that Geoffrey had sharply severed himself. She sat down on the rug beside the old retriever Nell, who was sleeping away her last days peacefully before the fire, and took the dog's stiff, trusty, old paw in her hand.

Mr. Heathcote turned up the lamp, sank down with a groan of comfortable weariness into his arm-chair, and rustled the county paper. That also sounded reassuring in its familiarity ; but as Hilary mused the fire burned, and by and by she broke in abruptly on his study of a report of the Quarter Sessions.

'I say, Neighbour, do you know that Geoffrey is dreadfully unhappy ?'

Mr. Heathcote dropped the paper. 'Geoffrey unhappy ! Bless the girl, what is she talking about ? Where is he ? What has happened ?'

'Oh, nothing—nothing new,' she replied, gloomily, 'only he is extremely miserable !'

'Nonsense, Hilary ! Geoffrey is always cheerful—an excellent example he sets us all, too, with his patience. I'm sure, when I grumble' (holding out his paper at arm's length, and throwing back his head), 'when I grumble, because I can't see small print just as well as I once did, it makes me ashamed of myself to think how Geoff bears his heavy trial !'

'Oh, he doesn't the least mind being blind,' said Hilary, 'that is no trial to him.'

No mortal love is without flaw. The most perfect has

its moments of disloyalty, its brief spaces of disenchantment. Hilary felt at this moment thoroughly out of charity with Geoffrey.

'Being blind is nothing ; but he said this had been his ruin.'

'Good gracious, child, you are dreaming ! I should know if he was ruined. He isn't ruined. He never speculated in his life. Who does he say ruined him ?'

'I don't know, he didn't say.' A pause. 'She is dead.'

'Dead ! I can't make head or tail of it. Some one dead who was the ruin of Geoffrey ?'

'He was in love with her,' said Hilary, flushing scarlet in the fire-glow.

'Geoffrey in love ? Nonsense ! He is no more in love than I am. There's nobody for him to be in love with. Besides, poor dear fellow, he got over all that years ago, and a bad business it was. Stop a minute, though—dead, you say ? and he in love with her still.' Mr. Heathcote rose, and stood with his back to the fire. 'Is it possible ? Can he be still in love with little Celia Drummond ?'

'You do know about it, then. Oh, tell me. Who was Celia Drummond ?'

'Still in love,' he repeated, sitting down again, 'still in love with little Celia Drummond ! Who was she, do you say ? Poor old Geoffrey ! Not forgotten the little witch yet, with her innocent rosebud of a face, who played him such a heartless trick. I couldn't have believed it of the girl—or of any girl, for that matter, for I think girls are mostly good, honest little souls, and mean what they say. I'm sure you never would have done it, Hilary.'

'I/' said Hilary.

'That I'm positive you wouldn't. I know better. You wouldn't have promised to wait for him if you hadn't meant to keep your word, "for better, for worse," you know. Don't tell me.'

Mr. Heathcote paused to poke the fire.

'But he never would listen to a syllable of blame of her, not though she had been stopping here with her father—engaged to him—and dancing and singing about the place,

and laughing till we were all out of our wits about her, and Geoffrey scarcely knew whether he stood on his head or his heels. It was my poor old mother who christened her the Rosebud. Bless me, that's ten years ago now, ten years last August, and Geoffrey wasn't more than six and twenty, and saw as well as you do. And the dear old mother was alive still, as active as may be—and now she's gone, and that poor little treacherous cat, Celia, with her blue eyes—she's gone too. And we ought to feel charitable towards the dead, Hilary child.'

'Yes, yes. But what happened?'

'What happened? Why, Geoffrey went to sea—he couldn't waste his time dawdling about on shore for ever. She knew that, and she cried and clasped her hands, and made such a fuss as never was, promising to be true and faithful all her days. I'll be bound he never made her half as many promises as she made him. But he meant to get on in the service for her sake. I used to tell her, "To make the crown a pound my Jamie ga'ed to sea," and she'd laugh and run to the pianoforte, and sing the song all through like a little nightingale. Ah well, who'd have thought it?'

'Did she forget him?' asked Hilary, in a whisper.

His face clouded over. 'There was Geoffrey's accident. She was abroad with her father. When I got the letter they were in Italy, and I wrote and told her I was going out to him. There, we needn't think about that time; you know how I found him. When he landed at Portsmouth he had been away three years. He had a mind to come straight home at once. The Drummonds were back in England then, and I wrote for little Celia to be here to welcome him—she and her father. I thought it would make things a bit easier for Geoffrey, for, all said and done, it was a sad kind of home-coming for him. The dear old mother's chair was empty, and then his blindness; so I thought if he could just hear his little Celia's voice, and if she could sing some of her little songs the first evening, why, it would help us over a day or two, till he got more used to things.'

Mr. Heathcote pondered again.

'Well, I was fool enough to give him a hint that I ex-

pected to find her at the Grange. The doctors in London hadn't given us much hopes ; so I said : " Come home at once, old man, and I shouldn't be surprised," I said, " if there was some one there to welcome you." And when we were coming along in the train, I could see the hope in his face. Well, we got home, and I looked to see her come running out into the porch to greet him. There was old Reynolds standing there—and the dogs, they were all there, and poor Geoffrey never said a word or asked a question. He knew quick enough, bless you.'

'She didn't come?'

'Not she. All that evening—I can see Geoffrey now, sitting in this room and trying to talk about the farm, or the garden, or what not, and asking how such and such a shrub was getting on. I saw through it all quick enough, and I kept fancying he was listening for a carriage. We did hear wheels once—he never moved a muscle, but I saw his face turn red, and I went and looked out of window.'

'And what was it?'

'Why, only the luggage-cart with our boxes from the station ; and before the end of the evening I could have bitten my tongue out for having said a word to raise his hopes. So next day I had to write to her—Geoffrey couldn't—and to read her answer to him when it came. It all had to go through me, don't you see? A wonderful letter his was ; I couldn't have believed you could put such a lot into so few words, all so plain and short. He set her free, of course—would not bind her down to his changed life, he said, if it was better for her to be quit of him. But who ever guessed she would take him at his word? Not I, for one—and you may be sure Geoffrey thought too well of her to doubt her, whatever he might say to me about the duty of giving her back her liberty. For my part, I made so sure that I wrote off a couple of lines on my own account, to say there was room and to spare for us all in the old Grange ; and so there was.'

Hilary, in her eagerness of listening, had raised herself on the rug, and was kneeling before him with one hand resting on his knee.

'I had even chosen her room—my sister's now—and planned new furniture, muslin and fal-lals for her dressing-table, such as girls like, and a lot of pink ribbon about—girls are partial to sarcenet ribbon, aren't they?'

'Oh, I don't know. Go on.'

'Well, and so—mercy on us all, when her answer came you might have knocked me down with a feather, easy. And the worst of it was that there was Geoffrey trying to wait patiently, and only able to know what was in his letter through me—and the pretty-looking little handwriting, all so indistinct, and crossed, and scratched out, that for the life of me I couldn't make it out. I saw with half an eye it was a nasty letter, and that made me worse. I kept fumbling about, and turning it upside down to find out where the crossing went to. I had to spell half the words, and I could hear Geoffrey grinding his teeth together, and striving not to say anything.'

'No wonder,' said Hilary.

'He couldn't keep himself from reaching out to take the letter, and I put it into his hand, as if there was any good in that, worse luck! He only had to give it back, poor chap! and ask me not to keep him waiting longer than I could help. It all came blundering out at last, with half the words wrong, and the pretty excuses spoilt—not that it signified. It was full of "dears" and "poors," and of pity for herself as well as for him; but for the world she wouldn't be an anxiety to him, and an added burden, and all that. She felt sure it would be a relief to him, not to have her to think for. She didn't say anything about her fine Italian *cavaliere* in that letter. It's an old story now, and "All's well that ends well," and I am sure he is well rid of her—only you say he thinks about her still.'

'He said it had been the ruin of his life,' answered Hilary, on whose heart the words seemed to have been burnt in.

'Nonsense, child, nonsense. Why, Geoffrey is always cheerful. He don't talk much, it isn't his way; and, of course, it was hard on him to have his professional career stopped when he was getting on so well. Ah, Hilary, child,

if you could only have seen him as he used to be, as fine a fellow as ever stepped, a trifle reckless you know, and fool-hardy, and that, but he would have steadied down in time. They all told me, when I went out to bring him home after the accident—the captain and all, that there wasn't a more promising young officer in the service. No, no, depend on it, giving up his profession was the thing he felt. The only time I saw him break down at all was when he got his commander's rank—a few weeks after we came home.'

'But Celia?' asked Hilary, impatiently, 'did he give her up at once?'

'Well,' said Mr. Heathcote, slowly, 'I blame myself for not seeing through her sooner. Geoffrey didn't either. None so blind, they say, as those that won't see; and he trusted her like—like a dog trusts his master. We persuaded ourselves that she was trying to do the best for him, and that she was sorry. And the end of it was that I ran up to London to see her, and tell her the rights of it. I might have saved myself the trouble.'

Mr. Heathcote stopped, and fidgeted in his chair, and took up his newspaper as if he did not want to continue the subject. But Hilary was inexorable. He got up and stood with his back to the fire again.

'I don't care to remember it, Hilary, and that's the truth. I never said a word of this to Geoffrey, or told him how I found out Miss Celia at last. Colonel Drummond asked me to dinner; there was another man or two—this young Italian she married afterwards was there, and a girl, a friend of Celia's—something like her, who chattered faster than she did, if possible. It was a hot night, awfully hot and stuffy in London.' At the bare remembrance Mr. Heathcote rubbed his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief. 'Celia and the other girl were sitting on the balcony when we came upstairs, and the foreigner went out to join them. I made sure Celia would come and talk to me about Geoffrey. I was going to tell her she should just rule at the old place like a little queen, and have two slaves instead of one, if she would come. But, instead, her friend came in alone, and Colonel Drummond fell asleep. We heard her laugh-

ing on the balcony, chattering Italian, so I had to talk to this girl—there was nothing else for me to do. After a bit, she said she wondered whether those two out there would marry some day, and she peeped out at them. I spoke up then, and told her I understood Miss Drummond was already engaged to be married. “Oh,” says she, “that’s all at an end; happily for Celia,” she said. And then—Hilary, I would not have Geoffrey hear this even now, it would wound him—she went on to describe the Grange, “a dead-alive old hole in the fens,” was what she called it, “with nothing but stagnant canals to be seen out of window, and sleepy cows feeding in damp meadows.” “Fancy Celia set down there for life,” says she, “with no one but a blind man and his old bachelor brother to amuse her.”

Poor Uncle Dick had lowered his voice, and as he repeated the contemptuous description of his beloved Grange, the colour mounted to his weather-beaten face. Oddly enough, those words, more than anything else, had cut him to the quick.

‘If that was her opinion, it was pretty plain no good could come of it. I was not going to stand hearing the old Grange flouted—that was altogether too much of a good thing. So I just had to go home and tell Geoffrey that he was well out of the whole concern.’

‘Well, and Geoffrey? What did Geoffrey say?’

‘Why, Geoffrey thought, I suppose, that the least said, soonest mended. I kept my own counsel about the Grange, and he cared to ask very few questions.’

Mr. Heathcote paused and took up his county paper.

‘Oh, do tell me the end of the story,’ pleaded Hilary.

‘End! There is no end. What more would you have?’

Geoffrey scarcely ever mentioned her name to me after that. And to tell the truth, the whole business had slipped my memory till a few months ago, when we heard the poor little thing was dead. I believed Geoffrey had pretty well forgotten it, too; but you say he hasn’t. Well, well! you never did see anything so bright and dainty as she was to look at, heartless little wretch—for all the world like a Dresden-china shepherdess; and poor Geoff was always wild about pretty

people when he had his sight. Hallo, Hilary, here's the grandfather come to look after you !'

Hilary was very silent as they drove home. All the evening, wherever her grandfather moved, he found her at his heels. When he took his little nap by the fireside after dinner, she sat motionless on a stool at his feet, looking up at him with great, fixed eyes. When he awoke, and stretched out his hand to take up the *Times*, she had pounced upon it with a quick jump, before he had time to reach it, and was eagerly waiting to read it to him all through, from leader to advertisement. She made his tea with laborious exactness, carrying his cup to him with both hands, like a child. And afterwards she played his rubber of backgammon with exaggerated eagerness, and wiled him into telling her long stories that she knew by heart already.

When at last she had made up the fire and swept the hearth, and was going off to bed, she came back from the door to kiss his forehead again, and rub her cheek against his shoulder, saying wistfully : ' You do like having me with you, don't you, grandfather, better than anybody else ? You are glad I am here—and you would miss me if I was dead or gone away, wouldn't you, dear ? '

CHAPTER XII

‘Old friends are best.’

THE next day was Sunday. The Abbey people, and the Hithersea people, and the Grange people, all came together in the churchyard after morning service, and, as usual, walked back in detached groups to the Grange.

But, to-day, the consciousness of an impending break-up was upon them all. Even those who were not going away felt that a chapter in their lives had come to an end. The cord binding them all together during the past weeks in good fellowship and amity had been loosened by some undefined force, and the habit of easy intercourse was already interrupted. Rhona, and Val, and Hilary, were keenly aware of it; so, perhaps, was Adrian Mowbray; while Geoffrey had only a dim perception of some change in the atmosphere surrounding him. Hilary walked beside him very silently, and let her grandfather have all the conversation to himself.

Val had gone forward to Rhona's side, and, without speaking, took from her the music books she was carrying.

‘I am going away to-morrow, Rhona,’ he said, as he unfastened the gate that led into the cedar walk. ‘I couldn't well get away before, because of Sunday. You don't mind my staying over to-day?’

‘I don't like you to ask me that,’ she answered, sadly.

To him there was a melancholy kind of comfort in being allowed to walk by her undisturbed. He knew the worst, and at least she was no longer anxious to avoid him, or afraid of anything he could say to her. The gentleness of her manner was pleasant to him even now.

‘And I mean to get on the best way I can,’ he said,

presently. 'I know you will be glad to hear that. Geoffrey talked to me last night. At first I thought I should go to the bad the quickest way I could find out——'

'You never would give me such misery,' she exclaimed, taking hold impulsively of his arm, as if to stop him at once.

'I don't know. Sometimes I would have given anything on earth to make you miserable—to make you care about me one way or another, I did not much mind which.'

'Val, can't you take me as your friend?'

'I will see about it, Rhona. I will if I can.' He looked at her from head to foot. 'Just now I cannot even bear to hear you speak. I know you are awfully kind; but I am afraid of beginning to beg and pray for another trial, and that I am determined not to do.'

'Oh no, please don't do that.'

'I'm not going to do it; it would be no use. I understand that very well,' he said, quietly. 'Good-bye, Rhona, God bless you,' as they came to a turn in the path that led off towards the Abbey. 'I think I had better go now. I should like to walk home by myself, tell Adrian,' and he went away very quickly along the winding road.

'Hallo,' called Uncle Dick from behind. 'Where is Val Fitzhugh off to? I made sure he was going to stop to lunch, and to go over the houses afterwards. He wants to see my new South American fern.'

'I don't think Val knows one fern from another.'

'Eh? I always understood he was devoted to them. He said he was.'

'I am afraid the taste is going off,' said Adrian, drily.

'Going off! What do you mean—going off? No one wants him to look at the ferns, as far as I know, unless he likes it.' Uncle Dick was huffed.

'Val is going away to-morrow.'

'Going away to-morrow! Well, why not? He has been here a good long time, hasn't he? And, let me tell you, you have driven those partridges of yours quite often enough, if you want to have a head of game left for next season.'

'Yes, I know. My dear Neighbour, I beg your pardon.'

'Last time you sent him out with Laurie and the keepers, I was quite worried about the birds. It isn't that I don't like the fellow for himself, well enough; and, besides—I don't know—yes, well, between ourselves, in strict confidence (for one don't want those things talked of), only—it's safe with you, ain't it now?'

'We will hope so.'

'Well, between you and me, it has struck me once or twice that he was disposed to be rather attentive to my niece Rhona. *Épris*, you know, as the French say. I daresay it never occurred to you.'

'I won't say that,' said Adrian, gravely.

'Now how would such a thing do?' asked Uncle Dick, putting his head critically on one side. 'I understand that he has some property of his own—a maiden aunt, or something. I'm sure I don't know who told me, Lady Helen perhaps; and it might become one's duty to give the lad a chance—ask him down here for Easter, or something.'

'Why, to tell the truth——'

'I don't want to do anything marked,' interrupted poor Mr. Heathcote; 'but it would never do to stand in the way of Rhona's welfare. I just put it to you, Mowbray, as a man of the world, and the friend of the family—Is there anything it strikes you I ought to do?'

'I am afraid you are a day behind the fair.'

'Not at all, my dear fellow, not at all. If I don't come across him this afternoon I can write. If I decide on encouraging the young man, I can write,' repeated Uncle Dick, radiant with importance. 'I am the last man to be a matchmaker—you will do me that justice.'

'The very last, I should say.'

'Exactly, quite so—the very last; burnt my fingers once, as Hilary here will tell you, and have no intention to try again. But this is not the same style of thing. I might just sound Rhona.'

'Oh, don't make poor Rhona more unhappy than she is already,' interrupted Hilary, coming to his side. 'Don't you see how grieved she is?'

'Rhona grieving, eh? You don't say so, Hilary? What

next, I wonder? You don't mean that poor dear Rhona——' in a loud whisper. 'No, no; I mean—well, we will talk of it another time. I had no idea—poor dear Rhona. It all seems to come on a man, one thing after another; but we won't say anything now—better talk of something else. What a beautiful day for December, ain't it, Adrian?—Well, Geoff, what is it?'

His brother said something to him in an undertone.

'It's Val, not Rhona? Speak up, man. What, t'other way up, is it? Rhona won't have a word to say to Val? I don't know what to be at, among you all. Well,' striking his stick on the ground, 'that is what I call a shame—a fine young fellow like Val Fitzhugh—devoted to her, as you can see with half an eye. I wonder what Rhona is thinking of?'

Adrian left Uncle Dick to be appeased by his brother and Hilary, and with a few long strides overtook Rhona in the porch. 'Miss Somerville,' he said, following her into the hall, 'I think you will like to know that Val will find Lady Helen Grantley at Clyffe when he goes home. She is as good as a sister to him,' and, with a slight smile, 'a very capable comforter.'

'Thank you,' said Rhona, sitting down wearily on a window-seat, and putting her hand up to clasp her throat. It was aching painfully; Val's quietness and his kind parting smile had gone to her heart. Adrian leant over the back of a chair and looked at her. The mid-day sunbeams poured in through the latticed window behind her, heightening the colour of the deep red gown she wore, and striking tiny sparklets and flames of gold out of the fur about her throat. A dusty shaft of sunlight from one window was whitening the ashes, and paling the orange glow upon the hearth; another buried itself in the hearts of some tall arums, and tinted their thick white leaves with faint, pale flame colour.

As he talked, Adrian was taking unconscious notes of the picture before him—of the high lights and the shadows in the hall, of the sun on her cheek, and its delicate outline against the dark fur—of the lines of her figure, its

somewhat weary pose thrown out upon the background of diamond panes, and the clouded gray-blue of wintry sky beyond.

Rhona's hands lay clasped in her lap, and her head was bent.

'I am glad to know about Lady Helen,' she said. 'Thank you.'

'She was his confidante from the beginning,' resumed Adrian. 'It was she who asked me to invite him here, otherwise——'

He stooped to pick up Rhona's muff which had rolled on to the floor, and did not finish his sentence.

Neither did Rhona try to talk to him. She was occupied by her perplexing and contradictory thoughts, by the deep regret she felt for Val's distress, and by a faint shadow of a misgiving as to her own wisdom in throwing such love as his away; while, at the same time, she knew more clearly than ever before how impossible it was for her to return it. The curious impulse to tell Adrian Mowbray all that was in her mind, had come over her again. She could not understand it—he who invited confidence so little, who had so often made repelling and cynical speeches in her presence! Yet she had an odd trust in him—the consciousness of it underlay all her sympathy with Val, and her keen appreciation of the value of his love. Adrian, however, said very little; he seemed to measure his words carefully, and to have set a bound for himself which he was determined not to overpass.

'This must be my good-bye also,' he said, presently. 'Val and I shall go as far as London together to-morrow. I have some work to do, and there are some political meetings which I must attend.'

'You must be glad to go back to your political work. How engrossing it must be!'

'Engrossing enough. For ten years past I have had no other life.'

'But surely you cannot regret that?' for he spoke with something of a sigh.

'I am not so certain. It is a life that demands great

sacrifices. They say that men who once take to politics never write anything again that is worth reading. Literature was my first love——'

'And you think it a higher one.'

'I do not say so.' He sighed again. 'I might have written something to redeem the blunders of my youth—who knows? But the less easy life seemed to have more in it, and so——'

Rhona got up as her two uncles came in at the door. She felt something like the impatience with which one lays down a book in the middle of an interesting sentence.

'So Val Fitzhugh is off, I am told,' began Mr. Heathcote, with a cunning assumption of innocence, and of starting an entirely new subject.

'I believe I am turning him out. I am going up to London myself to-morrow.'

'What, back to London and the Blue-books?'

'Back to London and the Blue-books. Even so. One may kill time as well over them as in any other way. You won't let me drive any more partridges, you know.'

'And we hear of nothing but a general election coming on, and a change of government. You are safe to get office, I presume, if your men come in?'

'Safe of a very doubtful blessing, then.'

'Come, none of that. Why, there's John tells me you are simply devoured with ambition and love of power.'

'Ah, John tells you. John might keep a civil tongue in his head, I think. You must never believe half John tells you about me. Remember that, Miss Somerville,' as he shook hands.

And so he went away.

'I wonder why he changed his tone so completely,' thought Rhona, 'as soon as Uncle Dick came in? I wish——'

But there are two things that men rarely lay claim to, or publicly confess—personal courage and personal ambition.

Mr. Mowbray was next heard of making a speech at a political dinner, which the newspapers of his way of

thinking all pronounced to be a brilliant one. It had no marked success at Wildenhall, for Mr. Heathcote fell asleep over it, and Hilary read it aloud to Geoffrey in the resigned tone of a martyr.

An odd constraint had come over Hilary of late. She treated Geoffrey with a distant gruffness that would have perplexed him, but that he forgot all about it, in the serener atmosphere of her fits of remorse and devotion. Often she studied his face silently, seeking in it those lines of sadness which she had never thought of looking for before.

It has become almost a truism that a subject long dormant, once revived, rarely falls back again into silence and oblivion.

Talk of a friend unseen for years, and he meets you round the next corner of the street. Dream of some one whose very name you have wellnigh forgotten, and when you go down to breakfast you will find a letter from him on your table.

Mr. Heathcote had a bewildered consciousness of this when, one January evening before dinner, his brother came into his room, and laid a letter with the Siena postmark on the desk before him. The seal was broken. Blind people seldom have a large correspondence. Geoffrey received few letters, and such as there were Dick opened and read to him, as a matter of course. But to-day, Geoffrey explained, when Laurence told him there was a foreign letter for him, some instinct prompted him to carry it first to Mrs. Somerville.

'And I am glad I did, Dick, because I want you to read it dispassionately, by yourself. It is a perplexing letter.'

Dick looked up at him. He had not seen that expression on his brother's face since the day when he had spelt out to him, with pain and grief, his betrothed's crossed and scribbled letter of farewell.

'Celia!' he involuntarily exclaimed.

The muscles of Geoffrey's face quivered.

'Read,' he said, and he went away to his own corner and took his violoncello out of its case, holding it between his knees, but not laying the bow across the strings.

When he had finished reading, Mr. Heathcote came and stood with his back to the fire.

‘Geoffrey,’ he said, with very unusual gravity, ‘before this letter of yours came, I wanted to find an opportunity of telling you that I was much pained the other day by hearing that your old trouble ruined your life. Is it so? I hoped it had been otherwise. You were always cheerful, and I hoped and believed no great harm had been done. But now I hear that you say it was your ruin——’

Poor Dick spoke with an emotion that quite surprised himself. He had hardly realised the pain he had been feeling until he tried to put it into words.

Geoffrey came quickly and stood beside him. ‘Dick, who told you that? Was it Hilary—poor foolish child?’

‘Yes, it was Hilary, and I know the child would not have repeated anything that was not strictly true. So it hurt me, Geoff, I must confess. I knew you had a poor life of it here—poor and dull, but I hoped you were pretty content, notwithstanding.’

‘I should be a brute if I wasn’t,’ said Geoffrey, impetuously. ‘No other brother in the world would have done what you have for me. Don’t let us misunderstand one another, Dick. I did say my life was ruined—but it was I myself who ruined it. No one else, mind, no one else—not——’

‘If it was ruined at all, it was by Celia Drummond,’ said Mr. Heathcote, doggedly.

‘No!’ replied Geoffrey more quietly. ‘When I said that—and I was wrong in saying it—I was very anxious another should not fall into my errors. I wanted Val Fitzhugh to make a better fight of it than I did. No one can know as well as I do how I failed. I might have been leading a real, active, useful life, as some other blind men are—conquering my misfortune, instead of giving way under it, and, at the best, trying for nothing higher than endurance. Because the other loss and disappointment came so soon afterwards I—I threw up the sponge, or whatever you may please to call it. I had no right to give in as I did! I see now how cowardly it was!’

'Geoff! no, no; nonsense. Cowardly! You were as courageous as could be, and as patient, always.'

'*You* were patient, Dick. Please don't think I forget that. I knew there was always a place and a welcome kept ready for me here. Perhaps I might have had a less empty life to show if you had turned me out to fight my own way in the world, Dick. No man has a right to live for himself. But as for you——'

Dick reached up his hand to put it on his brother's broad, stooping shoulder. 'Geoff, my poor, good fellow,' and then he set to work to clear his throat, and poke the fire, and his big, red silk pocket-handkerchief came into active requisition.

'And now,' relapsing gladly into his ordinary tone, 'about this letter that has come. Did you know——?'

'I knew Celia d'Ascena was dead; and,' after a pause, 'that she had a little child.'

'I say, Geoffrey, that little Celia must have had a good notion what you were worth, after all, to write and ask such a thing of you, after the way she treated you.'

'Of course it is a strange thing to ask—of a homeless man too, such as I am; but, Dick, you always made me think of this as home——'

This was just the speech to gratify Dick Heathcote. He clapped his brother heartily on the back, and showed signs of cheering up.

'Home!' he said. 'I should just think so. You and yours, Geoff—you and yours!'

'I know. She had a hard life, Dick, and she was pretty well heart-broken. My friend Beaufort used to find out about her for me, when he was in the Mediterranean Squadron, and to report to me. I did not tell you, for there never was anything but what it was pain to hear. Three years ago her husband left her, and went to South America. They say he went to see after some gold-mines out there; the fact is that he deserted her. She never saw him again. Old Colonel Drummond went to her at Siena, and stayed with her till the end. She died there. When she knew that she was dying, she wrote me the

letter you have just read. She must have been changed, Dick——'

Dick nodded.

'And now Colonel Drummond is dead also. She told them to keep her letter back till he was gone; it was only to be sent when the child was quite friendless, which is the case now. It is about five years old, Dick, I believe—a little girl.'

There was a tremulous eagerness in Geoffrey's face. His hand shook as he twisted the letter round his fingers.

'Have her here by all means if you like,' said Dick, abruptly.

'Oh, Dick! Would she be much trouble? I believe girls do not give any trouble at all, do they? And then there is Magdalen and Rhona. My dear Dick!'

'Perhaps she won't take to the Grange. Her mother never did!'

The old grievance, the long-ago words of disrespect to the Grange, were rankling still.

'Why, Dick, a little child like this!' Geoffrey paused. 'The truth is, her poor mother did not care for me. It was not the Grange—she never cared for me.'

'And yet you want to take the care of this child on you?'

His brother did not answer for some minutes. 'I thought, perhaps,' he said, in a low voice, 'that this baby might get fond of me by and by.'

'Well, have it your own way.'

Geoffrey was too much preoccupied to notice that the cordial tone was forced, and of course his brother's grimace and shake of the head were lost on him.

And so this strange thing was brought about, and Geoffrey's little ward—his faithless love's daughter—was to come to him at Wildenhall.

The letter he had just received was from Celia herself—an involuntary tribute to the trustworthy nature of the man she had forsaken. It was given by her on her deathbed to her father—an old man, himself in broken health—and he in his turn had trusted it to a friend, that it might be

forwarded to Geoffrey when he was gone, and the little Nathalie had lost her last protector. It was a shallow-hearted, perhaps a selfish letter, very touching, however, to Geoffrey, because of the undoubting trust it betrayed in his faithful love and forgiveness, as well as by a tone of motherly tenderness towards the little child she was leaving desolate and alone.

So Geoffrey was steeped in thankfulness for the trust she had vouchsafed to grant him, and Dick went off grumbling to Mrs. Somerville.

'It isn't that I have any objection to children myself—I never had. I know babies must squall—it's healthy for 'em—and break the windows with their balls or their rattles, or whatever it is. I find no fault with that. This old house has stood plenty of knocking about in its day without being much the worse for it, as far as I can see. I have no doubt I broke my fair share of windows once upon a time, didn't I, Magdalen? It isn't that; but I feel as if poor Geoffrey was being imposed upon. "Like mother, like child," don't they say? and who knows but this little popinjay may turn up her nose at Geoffrey and the Grange, and all, as poor Celia did before her.'

'I don't think that is likely, Dick, dear, is it?'

'Likely or not, we shall just have to put up with it, Magdalen. I couldn't have stood out for ten minutes against Geoffrey's face, if he had asked me to have the child's father here as well—a precious scamp he must be too, by the way! Poor Celia! to think of her jilting Geoffrey to take up with a ruffian like that—and of her choosing to live in a dirty old ramshackle palace at Siena, instead of in a decent, healthy, cleanly, English house. But there, Magdalen, Geoffrey never would hear reason about that artful little woman with the peach face. Bless me! I keep forgetting that the poor girl is dead and gone. No; what I mean to say is, that we must have the child here if he wants her, and anybody else that he fancies!'

Mrs. Somerville smiled, and took his hand.

'That is right, Dick. You always were our good Dick.'

'Not a bit of it. Why, Magdalen, I'm not one to talk

much ; but I hope the example of a man like my brother Geoffrey is not quite lost on me. When one sees such forgiveness as his, for injuries that he confesses spoilt his life, why, I hope I take it to myself as a lesson. And if it's love that makes him so eager to return good for evil, why, all I can say is, that the hymn Rhona makes us sing in church is true—"And the best is love!"'

So Dick posted off well pleased with himself, and went about telling every one that he had no objection to children ; Geoffrey might bring home as many as he saw fit ; that screaming was necessary for the development of their lungs ; and that, for his part, he had made up his mind to have every valuable shrub in the garden broken. Geoffrey must settle that with Reynolds.

He himself, meanwhile, was secretly surveying all the trees about the place, and trying the strength of their branches, with a view to a future swing.

Geoffrey said very little. He was more than usually taciturn ; but he made minute arrangements for the child's journey from Siena, under the escort of some English friends, and he stood listening intently, and stroking his beard with an odd light on his face, while Mrs. Somerville settled with the housekeeper about the preparation of his own old nursery for the little guest.

John Mowbray undertook to meet her himself in London, and to conduct her to Wildenhall, an arrangement which somewhat amused Rhona. A little child seemed so odd a charge for him ; but John's habit was to do the bit of work that lay nearest to his hand, without troubling himself the least about appearances ; the quaint aspect of a situation never occurred to him.

Nor could Hilary see anything to smile at in the whole business. She looked on with portentous gravity at the preparations, and kept as much as she could out of Geoffrey's ken, watching him, however, by stealth, and following him unnoticed, when, on the day before the expected arrival, Rhona took him upstairs for a final inspection of the sunny old nursery. Hilary looked on with a frown, while Geoffrey, kneeling with one knee on the high fender,

and still with the same curious, half-sorrowful smile on his face, felt for, and found, a certain white china lamb, that used to live on the mantelshef in the days of his own babyhood. He stood for a minute or two, touching the well-remembered curly wool tenderly, and then crossing the room under Rhona's guidance to the little cot, smoothed with his great hand the tiny frilled pillow that lay ready for a childish head. Hilary's face clouded more and more as she watched him, until at last, turning on her heel, she ran quickly along the winding passages, and was seen no more that day at the Grange.

But the next morning, quite early, the little donkey-cart, very heavily laden, came rattling up to the back door. Rhona looking out of her window, saw it coming, and wondered what was the unwieldy object that towered behind Ned Hawker in the cart. As she went down to breakfast, however, she encountered Hilary and one of the housemaids struggling up the nursery staircase, flushed and breathless, hauling between them an enormous rocking-horse, once the idol of little Hilary's heart, and kept tenderly in her room at Hithersea, a dear relic of the past, till it was lugged out in a fit of remorseful generosity as a costly tribute to the coming stranger.

By some inadvertence John Mowbray and his little charge came down by an earlier train than the one by which they had been expected. So it chanced that Geoffrey was out of the way when they reached the Grange, and only Rhona was at hand to bid them welcome. Little Nathalie had been taken up to the nursery to have her tea before her new guardian returned, but Rhona hurried her downstairs the moment he entered the house, and the first thing Geoffrey heard of her as he crossed the hall was a high childish voice, asking eagerly in a foreign accent for the *capitano*. Perhaps he would rather have gone upstairs by himself to receive her, but the little figure was in the middle of the hall before any one was aware of it. Unconsciously the whole party formed themselves into a sort of circle to witness the meeting. Besides Geoffrey, who made two quick steps forwards, there was his brother

standing before the fire drinking a cup of tea, and Mrs. Somerville knitting in her arm-chair, with Mrs. Bloomfield beside her, full to overflowing of curiosity. Hilary had come in with Mr. Heathcote, and John Mowbray was there also. But no sooner had Geoffrey been pointed out to her than little Nathalie ran up to him, without heeding any one else, holding out a tiny hand which of course he did not see, and failed to take in his.

'Why won't he give me the hand?' asked the child, turning with a queer quick indignation towards Rhona.

'He is blind, Nathalie,' she whispered; 'did not you know?—he cannot see you.'

But Geoffrey had drawn her close to him and gravely kissed her on the forehead. The little girl freed herself quickly, and stepped backwards, gazing at him earnestly, with her hands clasped behind her.

'Are you Geof-fa-ray?' she asked, after eyeing him from head to foot for several moments.

'Yes,' he answered in a low voice, 'I am Geoffrey.'

'And you cannot see me, really?' with a suspicion of tears in the clear silver of her little thin voice.

'Really, child, really!'

'Oh what a pity!—what a pity!'

'You tender-hearted little maiden, why?' and Geoffrey bent down towards the tiny creature whose pity seemed so genuine, and was somehow suddenly so sweet to him.

'I think you would like me more if you saw me,' she answered, with a half sob; 'I am so pretty.'

'I like you now,' he said, speaking softly in her ear.

'Oh, but you do not see me. Listen, good blind man; listen!' There was an eager ring in her voice, and something—was it a pang of memory?—sent a hot sudden flush over Geoffrey's face, a flush that came again and again, as from a heavily-beating heart. 'Listen, good blind man, I have got boo-tiful blue eyes.'

'Well, to be sure!' ejaculated Mrs. Bloomfield.

'I am sure you have,' said Geoffrey.

'So blue,' opening them wide, and gazing at him with them, 'like the sky—Pietro said so.'

'I know, little maid, I know.'

'And my curls, they're pretty too, he says—threads of gold.'

'I know they are.'

It was not the child he saw, the vain, lovely, ignorant, wee child. Poor Geoffrey! poor little Nathalie! poor man, that had been played with and deserted, caught by just such blue eyes, and sunny locks once, long ago.

'I can dance, too,' the little one went on.

'Come, come, you do not want a trumpeter, certainly,' said Uncle Dick, half amused, half disgusted.

'What's that?' she asked, turning on him like a flash of lightning.

'Only that little people don't generally praise themselves in quite such a barefaced way.'

'But he can't see me,' she replied, looking quickly from one brother to the other, like a small, sharp bird.

'Well, never mind that; no such loss. Good little girls should be heard and not seen. Bless me, that's all wrong. I mean, if they can't be seen they shouldn't be heard. That's what good little English girls say.'

'Do they?'

'That they do,' quite pleased with his success. 'Ask Hilary, there.'

'That big girl!' pointing with a minute, scornful forefinger.

'To be sure. She never says she's pretty.'

'Is she pretty?'

'Why, of course, she is a pretty English girl.'

'I am an English girl. The Italians have brown faces. I am English; but Pietro thinks I have a soul of fire.'

'Come, pooh, nonsense—a soul of fire, indeed!—that's rather too much of a good thing. I don't believe you have a soul at all.'

'Hush!' came in John's deep voice. 'Don't joke on such a subject. Don't endanger the poor child's belief in her own soul.'

'Bless me, I'm saying nothing against that. Her soul? Of course she has the sort of soul that goes to heaven if it

pleases God to take her—but a soul of fire, who ever heard the like? At her age, too. Why, the creature's nothing but a parrot, a regular little trained play-actress—a soul of fire, indeed !'

'I must say I agree with Mr. Heathcote,' said Mrs. Bloomfield primly.

Uncle Dick's loud tones and John's solemnity had frightened little Nathalie. She ran up again to Geoffrey and hid her golden head on his breast. He held her to him silently, his face still full of a painful tenderness. But the next moment she started back, and said, hurriedly :

'I told you I could dance,' and held out her little frock delicately between each finger and thumb.

Perhaps no one there was capable of understanding what a pathetic side there was to the little thing's unchild-like eagerness to please. The scene altogether was rather puzzling to an outsider like Mrs. Bloomfield, with its seeming waste of feeling and strong emotion. There stood the baby centre of the group, her golden hair ruffled, all vivid life and fire, her brilliant blue eyes alight, her attitude one of studied and subtle grace, her tiny foot pointed before her, hesitating as she saw that Geoffrey had shaded his face with his hand. Dick stood looking over his brother's shoulder, amused, carelessly curious and disapproving. John Mowbray was a mere looker-on. Rhona, filled with keen sympathy and instinctive comprehension, lent over Hilary, her hand on the girl's shoulder, as she sat cross-legged on the floor, her palms propping her chin, and her elbows resting on her knees, in as ungraceful a posture as it was possible to take. Hilary's under-lip pouted forward, a deep patch of crimson stained each sunburnt cheek, her magnificent eyes were fixed on Geoffrey, and were full of pain, of jealousy, of self-contempt, of a brooding something that was almost hatred, towards the pretty fairy thing that stood by Geoffrey's knee.

Suddenly the child looked up at him, and with a half-patronising, half-coaxing gesture, laid her hand against his cheek. He took it in his. There was much of a man's homage, in the way he raised the tiny white thing to his

lips, as well as of protecting tenderness, towards the little waif that had drifted to his feet. The gesture thrilled Hilary from head to foot with a strange passion of envy, of regretful jealousy alike of the living child and her dead mother. The strong feeling was divided between those two, Geoffrey and Hilary—the rest were only spectators—she watching him; he leaning forward with the light of love shining on his face, a hand which trembled a little smoothing his beard, and his blind eyes seeing with a tender joy that which was invisible, lighted up with the brightness of a dear, dead memory.

Later in the evening Rhona went to her own room, after seeing the little heroine of the day lying fast asleep, with her golden head nestled against its soft-frilled pillow. She found Hilary sitting with her arms crossed on the dressing-table, and a candle on each side of her, staring at herself in the looking-glass.

‘Rhona,’ she said, without turning round, ‘my eyes are blue too.’

‘Yes, indeed, my child Hilary.’

Rhona was half laughing and half crying.

‘They are blue and quite beautiful, oh, so much more beautiful than the ones that poor little mortal is so proud of!’

‘But Geoffrey never saw them—he does not know—Rhona!’

CHAPTER XIII

‘Give me a look, give me a face,
That makes simplicity a grace.’

THE fairy godmothers, who are wont to shower down gifts and graces on the cradles of new-born children, had been very generous to Geoffrey Heathcote’s little ward. But one charm they had either forgotten or denied to her—the charm of childishness.

Her small, oval face was delicately, brilliantly pretty, but not with the undefined, adorable chubbiness of childhood. Gainsborough would never have cared to paint her. Sharp as a needle, full of intuition, of quick perception and ready tact, you never found her making any of the pretty blunders that are handed down tenderly in families as household words.

And so with her little accomplishments. It was laughable and yet somehow melancholy to see so tiny a creature, perched on a high stool, gallantly attacking a grand piano, with frail hands that looked like bird’s claws on the keys. But she had her little *répertoire* of airs and variations, which she scrambled through with an adroit rapidity truly marvellous. And she sang Italian songs in a clear, weak little voice of the purest silver, perfectly correct and as perfectly devoid of charm. To see Geoffrey accompany those shrill little songs on his violoncello, carefully following the high metallic notes, with its deep, sweet, musical growls, was one of the trials of Hilary’s life. Nathalie was to her a riddle to be studied with sorrowful gravity. The little airs and graces, the eager birdlike movements and glances, the anxious appropriation of her guardian’s notice, the dainty

timidity and the odd look of restless uneasiness, all perplexed and jarred on Hilary, whose generous, careless, trustful nature had in it so much more childishness than was possessed by the precocious baby of six years old.

She did not know enough of the poor little waif's history to understand her ceaseless efforts to please; her unchild-like egoism.

Very little of the matter-of-fact, joyous security of childhood had fallen to Nathalie's lot. The people among whom she lived had always discussed things carelessly before her, little recking of the quick brain and sharp ears which followed and took in all their words. Brought up in the tumble-down Siena palazzo, her only luxuries had been sunshine and water-melons, her only friends the kind old Pietro and his wife Candida, who flattered her outrageously. Pietro was a poor *facchino*. Both he and Candida had done their loving best to spoil the pretty English child, and to dim and destroy what little simplicity there originally existed in her poor little character. But they talked together so plainly in her presence of her friendless estate, that she became fully aware of it, poor mite! and vaguely frightened at it.

The strangers who took care of her on her journey to England, and who brought her away from the familiar faces and voices which she passionately loved, were little conscious of her silent anguish and uneasy listening to their heedless talk.

'Poor little mortal,' she overheard them saying, 'it is devoutly to be hoped that she will make her way somehow, or it will be the worse for her. Ah well, a pretty face goes a long way, and she has got that.'

'Luckily for her—but I wouldn't answer for her temper.'

Nathalie, swallowing her grief in a corner, made the most fervent resolutions to be good.

The next time she was left alone in the room, instead of beginning to cry, as most children would have done, she advanced into the middle of the floor, shook out her frock, pointed her tiny foot, and began to practise a *pas seul*, and at the same time to sing, going over her little trills and runs

with anxious care. Suddenly stopping, she ran to the glass, and looked at her little face earnestly. Yes, every one used to say 'bellina' when they saw her at Siena—not only poor old Pietro. Even these strangers thought her pretty. She was secure of that at least.

Hence her despair at Geoffrey's blindness. It was he, in whose sight she had heard that it most behoved her to find favour.

She did not make much response to the advances which Hilary, struggling bravely with an unconfessed antipathy, tried at first to make. The two natures were as oil and water. What was to be done with a child who treated the rocking-horse with contempt, who was terrified of the cows, and the pigs in the straw-yard, and who had never heard of hide-and-seek?

The Grange gardens were famous for hide-and-seek. There was no end to their nooks and corners, and hollow clumps of Portugal laurel, their winding walks, and dear old secluded bowling-greens, their clipped yew hedges, and overgrown arbours. Hidden away in the wilderness was a real old-fashioned maze, where no one who held the clue ran a chance of being found; and then there were apple rooms, mushroom houses, and high kitchen-garden walls, enough to conceal a regiment. Was it not only two or three months ago that Lord Thetford's troop of children, coming over to spend a day in the Christmas holidays with Neighbour Heathcote, had beguiled the whole party of 'grown-ups' into a magnificent romp? Were not Uncle Dick, Lord Thetford himself, Rhona and the dogs, Val Fitzhugh, Denis Delorme, and all the rest of them, to be found tearing and shouting along the trellised walks, on that brilliant occasion—trampling down the tall hollyhocks in the borders ruthlessly, and rushing breathless to take refuge beside Geoffrey Heathcote under the great lime-tree on the lawn?

'Those,' thought Hilary, with a long sigh, 'were the good old days.'

Now when she proposed to inaugurate a game (on a far humbler scale of course) for the benefit of little Nathalie,

this child of six years old shrank away with a small pale smile, and said she would rather not.

What was to be done with her? She was afraid of dogs, too—rejecting old Nell's friendly advances, and flying terror-stricken before the big mastiff in the stable-yard, and the promiscuous collies, and retrievers, and terriers, that were perpetually to be met straying about the place.

Scamp was, unfortunately, her pet aversion—an aversion which he reciprocated with sullen, snappish interest. In his own way he was as much spoilt as she was. One unlucky day, seizing him at a disadvantage, Nathalie was ill-advised enough to fling a stone, which hit the black patch over his right eye. Scamp flew at her instantly with a yelp.

The child's shrieks rent the air. Much more frightened than hurt, but gasping for breath, and choking with fright and anger, she flung herself headlong into Geoffrey's arms; while Hilary swooped down on the offending Scamp.

'Hilary,' said Geoffrey, holding his little ward against his breast, and speaking rather indignantly as he felt the violent throbbing of her heart, 'you must never bring that dog here again. It isn't safe.'

On her side Hilary had gathered Scamp, still snarling, into her arms, and was trying to compose the white legs, which he kept thrusting out in all directions. She and Geoffrey stood facing one another, she hugging Scamp, he rocking little Nathalie on his shoulder. 'You must leave Scamp at home, Hilary, for the future.'

'I cannot come here without Scamp,' she answered, in a low voice. 'He has had a welcome here ever since he was a puppy. It would break his heart.'

'But, since he frightens the child—I tell you it isn't safe. He is as likely as not to bite her. That was really a vicious snarl.'

'Nathalie threw a stone at him,' said Hilary.

'That was foolish of her, but then she was so frightened. I had rather Scamp stayed at home, please, Hilary.'

'Say good-bye, then, Scamp, and we will go,' she answered gently. 'Good-bye, captain,' and she turned away.

'You understand, Hilary. It is no disrespect to poor Scamp, only little Nat must not be put in danger.'

'I understand,' said Hilary, still holding Scamp to her heart and giving Geoffrey a long, sad look.

Day after day passed, and she did not come back to the Grange. Her absence cast a sort of shadow over the place. Rhona, going over to seek her, found her sitting listlessly in the window of her room, with a big pocket-handkerchief of her grandfather's on her lap, which she had undertaken to hem. Hilary, with a thimble on her finger, was an unheard-of spectacle.

'Hilary, are you never coming back?' asked Rhona. 'You cannot think how everybody misses you.'

Scamp mustn't go to the Grange,' she answered, sighing, and looking sadly down at the fox-terrier who, faithful though troublesome, was sitting complacently on her foot. 'He frightens Nathalie.'

Then Dick Heathcote went over, and Hilary received him with a wan smile, but presently brightened, and walked back with him to the entrance of Wildenhall village. Farther than that nothing could persuade her to go.

'The captain said Scamp must never come here.' Scamp, hearing his name, cocked one ear, and glanced at her with a species of sinister inquiry.

'Old Scamp,' she said, softly, as she leant over the gate, and watched Dick disappearing alone, through the filbert-wood that was the short cut to the home farm, 'if you only knew all that I give up for you.'

But Scamp was utterly unresponsive, and tried to get up a fight with an unoffending sheep-dog belonging to the farm.

Mr. Heathcote went home, rather in a fuss. 'The place is as dull as ditch-water without Hilary, and she looks like a ghost.'

'If only she would leave Scamp behind,' said Geoffrey. 'It doesn't do to let little Nat be frightened.'

'Don't you think Nathalie was a little—eh, Geoff? The dog is harmless enough,' replied Dick.

Geoffrey looked vexed and worried.

That afternoon he made Dick drive him over to Hithersea. Hilary was nowhere to be found; but by some chance she had left Scamp behind her, and he lay before the house, basking in a patch of wintry sunshine.

'No one at home,' said Dick, 'but that old rascal Scamp.'

Geoffrey's face cleared. He hated a scene as much as he loved peace. 'I say, Dick, just hand me the brute up here, will you?' he said, speaking from the dogcart. And so Scamp was carried off, snarling and showing his teeth, as an olive-branch, to Wildenhall, Geoffrey leaving a message for Hilary that she must come and fetch him if she wanted him.

Late in the evening she arrived there, to find Geoffrey striving to bring about a better understanding between Nathalie and Scamp—a difficult task. The child eyed him superciliously from a safe distance. Was he clever? She knew a black poodle at Siena who was very clever. Could Scamp beg, or 'die for his country,' or even catch a biscuit if it was balanced on his nose?

No, Scamp could do very little; he was rather rheumatic; he hopped on three legs; he was old. 'I don't see the good of him,' observed Nathalie, disdainfully.

'I have come to fetch Scamp,' said his mistress, appearing abruptly on the scene, looking rather shy, and still a little sullen.

'Here you are then, Hilary. Nat likes him now, don't you, little Nat?'

'Not much,' responded Nat.

Geoffrey pushed the dog towards Hilary with a smile, and she just touched his shoulder, with a brief, gruff 'Thanks, captain.' Neither he nor she were given to many words. For the moment his kind look had warmed her heart, and comforted her, but a cloud still overshadowed her. As she lingered near, unheeded, watching the little despotic figure lead her blind guardian hither and thither by the hand, and listened to the shrill, silver laugh, and to the softening of Geoffrey's deep tones as he replied to it, a great, unwilling bitterness took possession of Hilary's

heart. It frightened her. Never before had the shadow of jealousy tainted the pure, wholesome atmosphere of her soul. She hated it, and despised herself for yielding to it. She would fain love what Geoffrey loved, and rejoice in his new-found pleasure, but directly her eyes fell on the fair, smiling face, and the triumphant little voice sounded in her ears, up rose the unwelcome wave of mingled pain and anger.

Others shared her feelings in a less degree, and after a different fashion.

Dick Heathcote and Rhona were strolling up and down the broad walk under the wall that same evening, and watching two figures, whose shadows stretched across the lawn, one a long, broad, steady shadow, the other very small and slender, and restless. Little Nathalie was stuffing the button-hole of Geoffrey's Norfolk jacket full of crocuses—an innocent occupation enough.

'I can't say but what it is a pretty thing to see those two together,' said Uncle Dick, putting his hands behind his back, 'really a very pretty thing; and yet——'

'And yet, Uncle Dick?' echoed Rhona, clasping her hands confidentially over his arm.

'The creature certainly has a winning way of her own when she chooses, there's no denying it. I say it is pretty to see her patronising Geoffrey, and protecting him, and he, poor old chap! trying to take care of her in his blind way, and waiting on her just as if she was the queen. It's quite touching, Rhona, to my mind; and yet all the time, for the life of me I cannot tell you why, it makes me angry.'

'You dear uncle, does it really?' Rhona fervently squeezed his arm. There is no alliance so close for the time being as between two people conscious of a common aversion which they know it is unjustifiable to entertain.

'I wouldn't have poor Geoff guess it for a kingdom, but it does anger me. And why should it? It's all as it should be, I say to myself—an interest for him and all that. And yet I can't get it out of my head that he is being taken in. There's something uncanny about the child—Rhona, something heathenish. Now, only last Sunday,

Geoffrey was teaching her her hymn, sitting there in the window of the hall—as nice a hymn as you would wish to hear. She learnt it like a shot, I will say that for her, and said it without a mistake in less than no time—all about the birds it was, and the flowers, and sunshine, and little children, don't you know—how the Almighty made them, and loves them all. I tell you, child, the way Geoffrey talked about it, and the things he said, brought the tears into my eyes, a cross-grained old fellow like me, so pretty they were, and proper, and—and—loving, you know. Well, there was this sprit, as unconcerned as you please, perched up beside him on the window-seat, with her head on one side, just killing the flies on the pane as fast as ever she could, crushing them with her horrid little forefinger. And Geoffrey at that very moment telling her that Almighty God loves the very smallest creature He has made !'

'Oh, I hope you told Geoffrey.'

'Well, I did. But he looked so vexed, I was half sorry I had spoken, it seemed to hurt him. And it didn't do a bit of good. These sharp children make one feel like a fool. Geoffrey began asking her gravely enough if she had not understood him, and if she did not know that God could not be pleased with her for hurting the flies ; but she just nestled her head down on his shoulder, and pointed at me, and said in her innocent little way, says she, "Why does he kill the pretty pheasants then?" The little minx ! I hate your sharp children. As if that had anything to do with it—the pretty pheasants, indeed.'

Rhona laughed.

'Oh, Uncle Dick. The little wretch ! I am afraid she had the best of it. What could you find to say ?'

'Say ! Why, I told her to mind her own business, to be sure. Things are coming to a pretty pass when one has to excuse one's self to the babies in the nursery for shooting one's own pheasants ; she'll be finding fault with the game-laws next, I shouldn't wonder. No, Rhona,' his indignation suddenly taking a wider sweep, 'I have no patience with all you young folk. You are all alike. There will be no children left in the world soon, nor boys and girls either, for

that matter, what with board-schools, and popular science, and the kind of books you choose for your reading—theology and conchology and all the rest of it.’

‘Uncle Dick! I don’t know one shell from another!’

‘Well, it would do you no harm if you did. Shells are pretty things enough, like all the works of nature. I don’t mean that—but you are all trying to have old heads on your young shoulders, and reading books you can’t understand. Girls were pleased enough with Miss Edgeworth’s *Moral Tales* and Peter Parley’s *Travels* in my time, and they were every whit as pleasant members of society, and much more cheerful and light-hearted than all of you. Why, there were my cousins, the Tom Heathcotes, who lived at Southwold; bless me, how merry they used to be—and Ella Maynard too, the sweetest girl of them all, only she died, poor little dear, and I—well, well. There’s even Hilary lost half her life and spirit this last winter from one cause or another,’ and Uncle Dick took off his hat, and rubbed all his hair up the wrong way in his vexation.

Poor Hilary! for her part she turned her back most unwillingly on childhood. With very lagging feet she had come to stand ‘where the brook and river meet,’ and if her morning was rising into noon, it was not by her goodwill.

A sudden moment of change comes into most young lives. Rhona, as well as Hilary, felt the greater swell, and strength, and swiftness, of the tide that was sweeping her along.

There was some foundation for poor Uncle Dick’s complaint. His playfellows were rapidly becoming sadder and wiser people. Hilary felt it, and longed in vain to turn back; she wished for nothing better than the wild freshness of morning, with its cloudless sky. Not so Rhona.

There had been a certain winter’s day which they both looked back upon, as the close of an era—a gray, short winter’s day, closed by a frosty sunset before four o’clock in the afternoon. Nothing seemed exactly the same after that day. It was the one before Val Fitzhugh went away from Wildenhall.

Not that the parting with him, however, made it a marked day to Rhona. She had known beforehand that

some time poor Val must ask his question, and receive his answer, and go, brave and forgiving, on his way. No, it was not parting from Val, it was that quarter of an hour's talk with Geoffrey in the hay-shed, while the milking was going on, that had filled her mind with thoughts she had never since been able to put to silence. And it was also a word or two spoken by Geoffrey to Val Fitzhugh, in the hall of the Grange, that quenched, all in a moment, Hilary's childish and heedless security.

The change in her sadly puzzled Uncle Dick. Ever since Rhona came to the Grange he had been haunted off and on by a misgiving that she might turn out 'a blue stocking' on his hands; but Hilary had never given him cause for a moment's uneasiness. His fair niece, reclining under a beech-tree reading the 'poets,' as he expressed it, made a charming pastoral picture. There was not much danger in the 'poets,' though he might still have been a little anxious about Rhona, had Hilary not been at hand to beguile her into a day's boating on the mere, or a scamper across Wildenhall heath on her pony. And he was fain to confess that until lately, one girl was not more simple and easily amused than the other. But times had changed. Hilary was growing listless and passive, and left Rhona to spend her days undisturbed in the little study upstairs, whence she came down to luncheon with an absent look in her eyes and no colour in her cheeks.

Her uncle looked on sorrowfully. By and by it began to dawn on him that his worst forebodings had fallen short of the truth. A poetical student was bad enough, but a 'girl author——'

His old-fashioned prejudices were deeply shocked. Rhona was shy and reticent enough, he must confess, and felt the advisability of silence on such irregular proceedings almost as strongly as he did himself; but when the Dean of Morechester took occasion to congratulate him on his niece's literary aptitude, and when, as he shrewdly suspected, John Mowbray had let his brother into the secret of Rhona's undertaking, Uncle Dick really felt that a compromising family secret was being disclosed to the world.

Rhona, it was quite true, had grown absent, and looked preoccupied.

'Her wits were clearly wool-gathering,' said Uncle Dick.

Ever since the day, months ago now, on which Adrian Mowbray, conducted by his brother, had made his unwelcome appearance in her little sanctum, and had tendered her his help and counsel, she had been living in a dream. She could not forget how humbled she felt, as she stood abashed and tongue-tied under his penetrating gaze, conscious of, without seeing, the quiet compassion of his smile. And her dream was of revenge.

As she watched him from the window, after he left her, walking away with John, and speaking earnestly, she knew almost as well what he was saying as if she had been beside him in the cedar walk. She saw him point over his shoulder at her window with his stick, and she saw also John's complacent smile.

All in a moment a sudden flame of energy, of determination, of ambition, blazed up within her. She went back to her desk, tingling and glowing, with cold, clenched hands and a quickly throbbing heart. The brown book episode was still fresh in her mind. And now—well, she would show this kindly, contemptuous, condescending critic, with his air of civilly-veiled pity, that a woman could succeed. More than that. She would hold up before those scornful eyes such a picture of a perfect life as he could never have conceived. She would paint one who, walking securely in the light of an unclouded faith, had feared to face no new truth, no subtle doubt, but who had ever come off more than conqueror in the great struggle. How could she fail to write with a power beyond her own, when she had a theme so lofty, when she would only have to sound the note of triumph and victory, over and over again, with ever-increasing clearness?

Adrian Mowbray should no longer smile indulgently, and warn her against over-much zeal. Evidently he thought her capable of nothing better than fits of indiscriminating enthusiasm, whether over his own despised poems or over this great and solemn task. Well, his eyes should be opened.

It was odd, though, she repeated, and provoking, and altogether unaccountable, that he should misjudge her so completely, since even in that first unlucky interview she had felt him to have the gift of ready comprehension, and she had been unaccountably impelled to take him into her confidence. If only John and Uncle Dick had left her in peace, and had not built up this wall of embarrassment and misunderstanding between them, at the very outset of their acquaintance!

Every time she saw Adrian Mowbray the nameless attraction grew stronger; but the scheme of commanding his unwilling homage receded more and more into the background, and lost itself in other wishes and aspirations.

She was sorry for Adrian, as her father had been before her. The melancholy, the dissatisfaction, the occasional solitary note, that Jasper Somerville had been quick to observe, even in his earlier and more dogmatic style of writing, made itself audible to Rhona also. She utterly forgot her desire to confront and confound him by some success of her own. She only wanted him now to receive comfort, and that by her father's means.

More and more eagerly did she search through her papers day by day, seeking for the burning words, the overmastering truths, the evidences of such an indomitable faith, as must tear the veil of doubt from Adrian Mowbray's eyes.

The thought of her father and the thought of Adrian met again and again, and mingled in her work. It came to be hard to separate them. Her father's presence grew more real and more intensely dear, as the hope that he was Adrian's destined deliverer brightened before her. It was a work he would have gloried in. It was his work, she repeated to herself. She was but the instrument—it was he who, being dead, yet spoke in eloquent and convincing words. Full of his image, she never dreamt of danger to herself, till Geoffrey's warning, 'Take care, Rhona, you are treading on dangerous ground,' came on her like a clap of thunder. Had she been over-confident? Could it be a just warning? What would her father have said if, in rash

unconsciousness, she was thrusting herself into a position of peril? She was far too honest to blink the question, when once it had been presented to her. She tried to face it very truthfully, and to find out whether, as regarded Adrian Mowbray, she could still say with a single heart, 'Lead us not into temptation.'

He went away, and she was dismayed at the blank left by his absence. If she could only have had one more talk with him—only one, she thought. Each time that they had been together, she remembered after he was gone, having said something which she would fain recall, or at least express differently—or else she had left unsaid some word that now she would give a great deal to have spoken. Theirs had been such tantalising intercourse. Their partings always left her dissatisfied, and restlessly wishing for another meeting. She found herself wondering whether the talk, broken off suddenly last time, might not, perchance, be finished on the morrow. Then again they met, and again she was disappointed. The sense of incompleteness oppressed her.

It was his fault, no doubt, in a great measure. She could never quite fathom or compass him. Why did his habit of mockery so often perversely belie the better feelings of his better nature? It made her angry; he was in many ways a puzzle to her, and she could not rest until she had found the puzzle out. And then he was not always cynical or sarcastic when he was with her; quite the reverse at times.

Now that there were no more meetings to look forward to, the days seemed dreadfully long and empty. Perhaps Geoffrey was right, she had been careless and over-confident. She strove to find out what her father would have had her do; and the very struggle led her a step higher, as she acknowledged that he would rather have bidden her ask what was God's will for her, than seek counsel even from himself.

Still she could not help entertaining a hope that in an indirect way her work might still influence Adrian Mowbray. Some day he would read those beautiful writings that were now filling her own heart with pride and gladness. Her

faith in her father's infallibility gave her courage to struggle on patiently with her work. As long as the bright shining of his memory fell on her unclouded, she would neither suffer herself to be weary nor discouraged.

One day, however, she made a discovery which so dimmed that golden thread that for a time nothing but darkness seemed to be left to her. She was sitting before the Chippendale escritoire, with a letter of John Mowbray's lying before her. He was still her most active coadjutor, sending her valuable contributions to her work at no rare intervals. His last letter asked her for the date of some event in her father's life which he was anxious to verify. There must surely be some early letters, or some journal, among the papers in Rhona's possession, which would furnish him with the information he required.

Rhona had been searching at intervals for several days. Now, as she opened one of the innumerable drawers in the old cabinet, she espied a blue, morocco-bound book, pushed away under some papers in a far corner. It had once been fastened by a lock and key ; but the key was missing, and the clasp had fallen back.

She drew it out with rather listless fingers, and turned over one or two pages, closely covered with her father's handwriting. She knew it to be his, though it was more irregular and straggling, and less formed, than any she had seen before. It was that very manuscript book, the record of early doubt and struggle, which a year ago had caused her mother such acute distress, and which, acting under Geoffrey's advice, she had finally resolved to lay aside. Hastily, and with strong misgivings, and an uncomfortable sense of dishonesty, she had thrust it one day to the back of a drawer she seldom opened, and had piled papers on to the top of it, as if to cheat herself into forgetfulness of its existence. And now, unsought, it had come to light again.

Rhona went on reading, quietly enough for a while. Then she paused with a start, and turned back to the first page. The colour, though she was quite alone, rushed over her face in a quick, red wave, then ebbed away as

quickly as it had come. She had the air of a person who has received a sudden shock.

Presently she closed the book hurriedly, pushed it far away, and gazed blankly out of the window. But the next moment she had pulled it back, and was poring over it more breathlessly than ever, with her hands clasped like a pent-house across her forehead. She read on till thick-coming tears caused the lines to waver up and down, and when she had brushed them impatiently away, others followed so fast that the page was soon one white, wet blur before her eyes.

‘Father, father, father!’ she said, half sobbing.

To many the reading of that book would have cost nothing—less than nothing; but to poor Rhona, in her ignorance and inexperience, it was the demolition of her whole life’s ideal. The very foundations of her creed respecting her father seemed to be shattered at one blow, and a dark shadow cast across his memory. She had always felt so secure that he was not as others are—that he had never yielded to the temptations that are common to most thinking men, but that all the pitfalls and snares of scepticism, spread out at once before him, were powerless to cause him so much as an uneasy hour. In short, she had accepted John Mowbray’s ideal of his master. Jasper Somerville had, in an unusual degree, made a friend and a companion of his daughter, and had admitted her into his world of thought. She was, however, little more than a child when he died, so that he had guarded her with anxious care from any breath of that atmosphere of controversy which long since had ceased to trouble him on his own account. Nor was he a man given to much introspection. He dwelt very little on his own past—the present was too full of work and of absorbing interest, and the season of retrospect had never come to him.

Therefore, all that she read was painfully new to Rhona. She had never dreamt that time was when he had descended into the very thickest of the fight, and for a time had been worsted and overcome. Her poor father! John Mowbray’s lofty tone of security and compassionate superiority only

helped to mislead her, and to strengthen her conviction that a maiden shield, one untouched by the dints and the scars of battle, was the thing to be most proud of.

Rhona was quite alone. There was no one at hand to whom she could speak about her troubles, and she brooded over them in silence day after day; magnifying the ordeal he had passed through; picturing what she hated to confess had been his failure, until the subject got the better of her reason, and overmastered all her efforts to escape from its tyranny. Her passionate love for her father had never been so great as now, that a yearning pity for him, an instinct of protection, an impulse to shield what she was compelled to consider his weakness, from the knowledge of others, which was in itself an agony, were all added to it. To a man of Jasper Somerville's nature, this testing of all the foundations of his faith had been a season of such suffering as to smite his spirit down into the deepest gloom; and his disjointed journal was full of expressions of a remorse that terrified his poor little daughter. What made it worse was that it remained unfinished. The last words scribbled on the fly-leaf of the book were wrung from a spirit given over to despair, and they broke off abruptly, a sentence having been begun for the end of which there remained no room. Rhona searched feverishly for another volume. None of that date was forthcoming. Not a word or line indicated the ending of the conflict.

It was a profound disappointment; one which she mourned over more than was the least reasonable. It was worse far than the mislaying of the last volume of some enthralling story. It is all very well to be told it ends felicitously—that is not the same thing as reading it for one's self. Rhona knew that her father had come out from the shadows of those dark days, and had been very happy. She had never known him otherwise. And yet she could not take comfort. His misery was too terrible a reality; and only words of his own could deliver her from the haunting thralldom of its memory.

For the moment, also, poor Rhona firmly believed that her fairest dream was over, her father's words could never

now help Adrian Mowbray. In that thought lay perhaps the keenest sting of her half-visionary distress. She had reared her castle in the air with such fond hopes, and lo ! a 'bolt from the blue' had laid it in ruins before her eyes.

Meanwhile the loom of everyday life went working inexorably on, weaving the pattern of its minute and cunning web, while she looked on at its progress with preoccupied eyes. Great events were not the fashion at the Grange, but there, as elsewhere, restless Nature wrought perpetual change.

Dick Heathcote himself had for a wonder found February and March rather dull months. Somehow or another he was left a good deal to his own devices. Geoffrey—really Geoffrey had eyes only for the child of his adoption, to whom his great silent heart went out ever more and more ! Verily Dick had no patience with him—the child was well enough ; but he could see nothing so very wonderful about her after all. Hilary too—what was amiss with Hilary he could not pretend to say—she ran no merry races against the easterly wind this year. So Dick felt dull.

When April came, however, he needed no one's sympathy or companionship. His loneliness was a thing of the past. All day long he was out of doors, walking here and walking there, wrapped in an ecstatic trance that was enough to puzzle any one, except an enthusiastic gardener like himself. For his shrubs, his children, his darlings, were awaking one by one from their winter sleep to greet him, and he asked for no better company than theirs. Each day brought him a new joy, as he watched the tardy spring lingeringly clothe herself in her resurrection garments. Each hour a new life revived. Now it was some precious conifer, concerning which he had been anxious ever since Christmas ; now some tender seedling that never bore the cold wind well. To see him hang over some poor shabby little brown plant, glorying in the first tiny red gemlike bud that testified its survival of the long, hard winter, was veritably pathetic.

But poor Uncle Dick ! even in the gardens he could not get his own way entirely. The bursting life and glee of spring, the rising sap, the tender flush of green, the loud sweetness of the birds, got into his blood and made him

restless. He, too, wanted to be up and doing. He set vigorously to work, and planned improvements in his grounds on an extensive scale, which Reynolds, cold-blooded and unsusceptible, nipped ruthlessly in the bud. Alas! for the new walk of Mr. Heathcote's dreams—the opening through the trees that was to let in so fine a view of Hithersea Church—the rhododendron bed, masking the kitchen-garden wall! Reynolds was unpropitious. 'The men,' he said, 'are a-duin' of their seasonable work. We can't be sparing of them for these 'ere ploys of yourn.'

'But I want to make my walk, Reynolds.'

'I make no doubt but what you du. But this is how I fare to look at it. You're clean and tidy now—keep so. I've only just got you cleaned up and set to rights arter the winter, and I ha' started, and meu (mowed) for the fust time only yester-day. Why, we was clean ate up with daisies, and that's the treuth. But if yeou get a-messing, and a pulling of yourself about in this 'ere April weather, with the showers wetting of you through and through, why, you'll get into such a sight of muck, you won't know how to bear yourself, nor I shan't know how to bear you neither.'

And Reynolds signalled to the garden boy, who was drawing the mowing machine, and marched off doggedly behind him, making havoc among the poor daisies on the white-spangled grass, and leaving a close-shaven green track behind him.

'There's something in what you say, Reynolds, I confess,' said his master, following ruefully, spud in hand, behind. With some display of temper he speared an obtrusive dandelion, dug up and flung away a couple of plantains, felt the better for it, and looked complacently about him. He was not to have his 'opening' or his walk, he saw that clearly, but he certainly was irreproachably 'clean and tidy,' the incorrect daisies on the lawn were melting away in Reynolds's track like snow in sunshine; and here was a *pyrus japonica* lighting up a gorgeous red torch of consolation, and the daffodils were coming laughing out, and painting yellow jocund lines across the fields. The 'opening' might wait; after all, that fine young *Lawsoniana* would have had

to go, and his leader measured over a foot and a half last year, and it would be a pity to clear away those lilac bushes that were just coming into bud, and, dear me ! here was the cuckoo arriving—that was his note, still veiled, and sounding softly far away from the wood across the mere.

Mid-April brought the blackthorn with its white fragrance, and on Easter Eve Adrian Mowbray came down by himself to the Abbey. It had been a hard session, a great party fight had been raging ever since Parliament met, and he looked somewhat fagged and careworn when he made his appearance at the Grange, where he found the whole party paying a delicate, though injudicious, compliment to the spring sunshine, by drinking tea out of doors. The sun had certainly been scorching all day long, and Uncle Dick resolutely ignored the north-easterly wind that sent icy currents athwart the heated air. Cold ! how could it be cold when the garden was full of yellow butterflies—and he should have thought it would keep any one warm only to look at that blazing bed of tulips ! Cold ! why, the bees had been at work all day. The sun was simply tropical. And Uncle Dick took off his coat and sat down ostentatiously in his shirt-sleeves on a basket-chair. His family, obliging and tolerably hardy, shivered secretly, and unobtrusively fetched fur cloaks for one another. After all it looked very bright and cheery, the white table-cloth glowed in the ‘all-golden afternoon’ light, and Dick was jubilant.

Adrian devoted himself to little Nathalie, whom he had never seen before, and who did the honours of the blue-bells, and with much coquettish secrecy exhibited a wren’s nest among the laurels.

The pigeons fluttered down upon the sunlit grass ; the rooks sailed cawing homeward ; lambs were bleating from the field ; a fresh crisp chill crept into the air.

‘What all this must be to you, after London, my dear fellow !’ said Dick Heathcote, beaming with benevolent congratulation.

His guest was stamping vigorously on the grass, and banging his arms backwards and forwards like a cabman, to warm himself.

'My pastoral tastes are perhaps imperfectly developed,' he replied, with chattering teeth.

'Why, I do believe you feel chilly on this lovely fresh evening,' and Dick glanced at the sun, as if to reassure himself of its heat and geniality. 'That comes of all the stuffy, crowded rooms you live in.'

'Oh, this is fresh enough,' said Adrian; 'I am prepared to grant you the freshness;' and then he was swept off to admire an early rhododendron that had just come into bloom.

Before he had satisfied his host as to his appreciation of the faintly-tinged, pinky-white blossoms, Hilary was bidding Rhona good-evening. Presently she went away by herself across the garden, Rover, with serious eyes, and a basket of primroses in his mouth, marching at her heels.

'Well, and what of Scamp?' asked Adrian, meeting her. 'Nothing amiss with the inestimable Scamp, I trust.'

The girl glanced at little Nathalie, who was swinging herself backwards and forwards between Adrian and her guardian, coyly holding a hand of each.

'Scamp does not come here often now,' said Hilary, gently; 'he stays at home with grandfather.'

Her eyes sought Geoffrey's face, and she stood still waiting for a moment; then, as he did not speak, she moved on towards the gate.

Adrian Mowbray went up to Rhona. Hitherto he had scarcely spoken to her. 'You are in some trouble,' he said, quietly; 'is there nothing I can do to help you?'

She looked up, startled. 'No, nothing,' she answered, quickly. 'Oh no; you cannot help me.'

CHAPTER XIV

‘To everything there is a season.’

RHONA turned slowly away from him towards the house. Her heart was beating fast, and she said to herself that he must ask her no more questions. She could not answer any.

He followed her into the hall in silence, and stood looking at her gravely, taking no notice of her attempted gesture of farewell.

‘I don’t want to force my services on you,’ he said, presently, ‘but you know they say that sharing a perplexity with some one else halves it.’

‘Yes, I believe they say so.’

‘Then will you try?’

Rhona looked up at him, a sudden gleam of amusement replacing for a moment the trouble in her eyes. ‘You have found it so?’

He looked slightly taken aback, and hesitated. ‘Why, no. If you put it in that way, certainly not. I was not referring to myself.’

‘I thought not,’ she said, quietly.

It did not seem the least strange to her that he should have divined her trouble, only she must not share it with him.

‘But, Miss Somerville, pray don’t take up the idea that I was talking platitudes to you. You may be right as far as I am concerned, though I am not prepared to admit even that—anyhow it is not hard to imagine cases in which people might be of great help to one another. I believe I could help you now if you would let me.’

She looked down thoughtfully. Perhaps he could help her. As often before, her impulse was to be perfectly frank with him, to disburden her heart of all its pain and wonder. But then came the swift remembrance that he was the very last person to whom she ought to speak—he, whom she had been taught to consider as an assailant of the faith, an antagonist. How should she dare put a weapon into his hand, or betray to him weakness and disunion within the camp? How confess to him that the proof-armour in which she was wont to boast herself had been pierced by arrows! Above all, how could she put a stumbling-block in the road which she had fondly hoped was to be to him a pathway of deliverance—and, oh! how lower in his sight the beloved, lofty, holy name—and let him see that her father, the teacher, the example, the confessor, had once faltered, failed, yielded, in the great and terrible battle between faith and doubt? That he had risen and gone forth after that battle more than conqueror, Rhona knew, and by and by she would rejoice in it; but as yet she could not raise herself above the level of defeat. Everything was in a mist. All her life she had been taking things for granted, and leaning with blind confidence on her father's faith. Perplexities she met by the thought of his clear vision; doubts were silenced by his certainty. But now there was no longer any firm standing-ground beneath her own feet—no hope for Adrian Mowbray—no triumph possible for the cause of truth.

Poor Rhona! She was far from guessing how readily her father would have laid open that chapter of his early life before Adrian Mowbray's eyes—how willingly he would have told that it was through the darkness he had passed into a more abiding light; by the loss of all things that there had come to him the infinite gain. Later he had thanked God for that night of horror during which his soul's foundations had been laid afresh, deep and sure; nor would he for worlds have missed the storm and cloud which, after they rolled away, left the sun to shine on him in its cloudless glory. As yet, however, these things were hidden from the eyes of his poor little daughter. In her

mental heaven, no sun or stars appeared. There was nothing left for her but to guard her secret with what faithfulness she might. What could she say now to Adrian? She bowed her head down on her clasped hands.

‘Can you trust me?’ she heard him asking her.

If she had answered according to her first impulse, she would have told him that she trusted him more than any one else in the world, no matter what his opinions might be. But she stopped herself in time. That would never do. She must try to reason calmly. The result of her reflections was, that she looked up piteously in his face.

‘I must not trust you. No; you less than any one. Please don’t ask me!’

He was silent.

‘Yet some help you must have,’ he said, presently, and then pondered again. ‘Could John be of any use, I wonder? If you fancy he could, I will send for him.’

‘John!’ she said, slowly. It was a new idea. ‘I never thought of John. Yes; I think John might, perhaps. I really think John could.’

‘Then he shall come.’

Adrian’s voice was as composed as before. Inwardly, he was filled with surprise, and moved with hot indignation at being taken at his word. ‘John! What on earth could be the use of John?’

Yes, thought Rhona, meanwhile, she might tell John everything—no need to spare him. It could do John no harm, or if it did, she could not help it. He just must take his chance. After all he was the cause of her distress. It was John who first forced on her this task, for which she had proved to be cruelly unfit. But for his persistence, she should have been spared all this. It would be a satisfaction, Rhona said, vindictively, to herself—an absolute satisfaction to confront and confound him with her sad discovery. ‘Yes,’ she repeated aloud, ‘I can tell John all about it, but it would be wicked of me to tell you.’

‘I must let you be the judge of that,’ he answered, gravely. ‘I only know that you must have some one to whom you can speak,’ and with very mingled feelings he

went away to keep his word, and telegraph a summons to his brother. 'Though in what possible way John can help her I fail to imagine. What comfort can he be to her? Whereas I—if I am not mistaken, I have already got some sort of notion of what she is breaking her heart about, poor child. But John won't find out that she is in trouble at all unless I tell him,' and he turned away from the post-office, repeating to himself: 'Poor child! Whatever it is, I am convinced I could have helped her; but John, of all people in the world! John!'

The following afternoon Rhona and Hilary were sitting at a table in one of the hall windows, trying, not in the clearest way in the world, to puzzle out clothing-club accounts with Mrs. Bloomfield. It was the Hithersea branch of the club, which, having fallen into melancholy confusion, was just now under inspection. Hilary, with her elbows on the table, looked flushed and bored, and Mrs. Bloomfield bent over the huge account-book, her face expressive more of sorrow than of anger. Suddenly the door leading from the porch was thrown open, and Laurence Somerville, who was supposed to be in London, came into the hall. Both the girls jumped up to meet him.

'Oh, Laurie, has anything happened to you?'

'Happened to me? No, of course nothing has happened. Only John Mowbray was coming down to-day, and I thought I would come with him, and have a look at you all!'

So John had come. Rhona was half dismayed. Since yesterday she had worried herself into such a condition of bewilderment that she had ended by not knowing, as the nurses say, 'what she would be at.'

Now that he had really arrived, she felt almost ready to echo Adrian Mowbray's sentiment, 'Of all people in the world, John!' For he was the last man living, the very last from whom she could brook the smallest criticism of her father. That was the last conclusion she had come to before the advent of Mrs. Bloomfield and her account-books; for was it likely that he could understand—he who in the whole course of his life had never known what it

was even to hold a question in suspense. What could be gained by telling him? She wondered what had possessed Adrian Mowbray to make such a useless proposal, still more what folly induced her to agree to it.

John could but obey the law of his being, and that was to be positive, and dogmatic, and to see things only in black and white. She did not blame him. But all the time she was stroking Laurie's shoulder, and looking into his clear, laughing eyes, and taking great pleasure in him, she was secretly debating how she could get rid of John.

'Mr. John Mowbray here?' exclaimed Mrs. Bloomfield, her attention diverted from the blotted column of figures, in which she had just discovered a deficit of twopence farthing 'Mr. John Mowbray! What may have brought him here, I should like to know?'

'He said the squire sent for him. He was at the station to meet him.'

'Indeed,' with her pen suspended in mid air, 'and what did he want with him, I wonder?'

'Oh, only to set us all to rights, and make every one uncomfortable,' said Hilary, in a tone of weary crossness.

'Hilary, love!' Mrs. Bloomfield's pen was pointed reprovingly at her.

'Well, he bothers grandfather with his priggish ways.'

'Easter is so busy a moment with the London clergy,' continued Mrs. Bloomfield, 'that I confess I wonder how he could contrive to get away.'

'So he comes,' thought Rhona, 'at what he would call himself a considerable personal sacrifice.'

Well, she was almost afraid he would have his sacrifice for nothing. She certainly could not have him sitting in judgment on her father. No shadow of a shade should be suffered to fall across his memory while it was in her power to prevent it.

Meanwhile Hilary went on grumbling about John, until she was suddenly interrupted by Laurence.

'I say, it's all very well for you to abuse John Mowbray. You don't half know what you are talking about. No, Hilary, you don't; none of you know. It's easy enough

to sit at home and pick holes in him, but it might be fairer to wait until you have seen what his life really is.'

'What do you know about his life?'

'More than you do, I daresay.'

'Why, Laurie!' exclaimed Rhona; 'I always thought——'

'Oh yes,' he broke in, 'I know what you always thought—of course I do! And now you think I have called him names often enough myself. Perfectly true—so I have. John bores me as much as he does any of you, I don't deny it.'

'Then why——'

'It's my belief that we fall foul of him, because his life is a trifle beyond our reach—it's a sort of reproach to us. I tell you what it is, Rhona, if you were to see the courts and alleys he works in, and the faces of the people, and John himself, going to and fro, early and late, summer and winter, in that vile air, and thinking it all the simplest matter-of-course, why, you'd—you'd think a trifle differently, maybe. That's all I have to say.'

'Oh, my dear Laurie! have you been down there?'

'Just once or twice,' said Laurence, who was suddenly abashed and ashamed of his enthusiasm. 'Two or three of us wanted to see the style of thing the newspapers have been full of, don't you know, and I got John to take us round his place, just for the fun of the thing, you see.'

'Was it very dreadful?' asked Hilary, quite awestruck.

'Dreadful? Of course not. There, nonsense, Rhona, let go. I have not turned missionary yet, worse luck. There are a lot of socialists about, and one takes a sort of interest in the working of it all. Some of the men John has got hold of are very fine fellows. We only went down for the lark, you know; but it's the real thing with Mowbray, and no mistake. Take my word for it, Hilary, he's a good sort, though you may see fit to call him a prig. I say, Rhona,' he added, in a whisper, 'I quite forgot that Mother B. was here. Don't go on about it any more now, for pity's sake. There's Uncle Dick. Hallo, Uncle Dick!' and he made his escape.

He need not have distressed himself about Mrs. Bloom-

field. Deep in meditation, she had not listened to a word he said.

'Rhona,' she said, presently waking up, 'I shouldn't be a bit surprised if the squire was thinking about making his will. He doesn't seem to have any mind to marry, and Mr. John Mowbray comes next to him you see, and so he just sent for him to have a quiet chat about business. Depend upon it, that's not far from the truth.'

But Rhona had followed her brother. Not finding him, she ran upstairs, and threw herself into a chair by the window of her sitting-room. Another revulsion of feeling had seized her. Laurence's words were startling. He, who so abominated any expression of sentiment, must have felt pretty strongly to speak as he had done. Good John! noble John! once more she saw him as her father's friend and worthy disciple, following his footsteps with brave patience along the sacred path of self-denial. His life must indeed be a real and true one, to have made so deep an impression on her careless, easy-going brother. While she had been sitting in judgment on him in her ignorance, deciding that he was harsh and narrow, those who saw and knew more of his daily life called him a hero—one of the heroes in God's army. Surely he was a man in whose counsel she might safely trust. It would be above all else, lofty and loyal.

There was a quick knock at the door. Rhona started up as John himself walked into the room. She sprang to meet him with both hands held out.

'Oh, is it you? How very good it is of you to come!'

'He took one of her hands, and shook it composedly, with a cool ignoring of her emotion that sent her back on herself with quick recoil.

'My brother tells me that you wish to see me.'

She drew a little away from him, and hesitated. He was only John Mowbray after all—only John! just himself, and no other. He might live like a saint, and die like a martyr, in the worst of London rookeries—he would still be John, and John only. There he stood, calmly, dispassionately awaiting her reply.

'Well, yes, I suppose I did. I thought you would know

what to do. But I am not so sure now' (a pause); 'you see I did not expect that you would be here so soon.'

'I can only stay till to-morrow morning. I could not have got away at all, but that Adrian's summons was urgent. I presume that you are in some real difficulty about your work.'

'Perhaps you would not think it real.'

'He gave me to understand that you were in great perplexity.'

'Oh, he does not know. I could not tell him. And now I am not sure that I want to tell you,' she stopped again. 'John,' in a lowered voice, 'did my father ever speak to you about intellectual difficulties of belief?'

He smiled slightly. 'You have no need to trouble yourself with such questions, Rhona. I should have thought you could trust your father.'

'Oh, then you know nothing about it.'

'I knew your father,' with another of those passing, taunting smiles, as she, at least, felt them to be.

This last one wrought her into impulsive action. She flung open her desk, and drawing from it the manuscript book over which she had shed so many tears, thrust it into his hand. 'Read that,' she said with an odd accent of defiance, 'and then tell me what you think about it. No, no; not here,' as he was proceeding to seat himself deliberately. 'Take it away with you. I could not bear to see you reading it.'

'Then I will take it home. But I must see you early to-morrow, as I leave by a morning train,' and John departed with a decorous, unruffled 'Good-evening,' while Rhona sank down on to her chair, and covered her face with her hands, feeling herself a traitor to her father.

Her conference with John had taken but a very few minutes. When, moved by a penitent recollection of the deserted clothing-club, she roused herself to go downstairs again, Mrs. Bloomfield's slow pen was still climbing laboriously up the same column of figures, Hilary was still fidgeting impatiently, and Laurence was further distracting her wavering attention by reading aloud snatches of a book which he had taken at random off the table. It was some

description of an American naturalist he had got hold of, whose sympathy with animals was described as being so remarkable that Hilary must needs be jealous of it.

'Five and three—eight, and two—ten, twelve, sixteen, seventeen,' in a hissing whisper from Mrs. Bloomfield.

'He pulled the wood-chuck out of its hole by the tail,' read Laurence loudly.

'What is a wood-chuck?' in a hurried aside from Hilary. 'Oh, dear me, yes, Mrs. Bloomfield. It looks like a farthing, but I daresay it is a halfpenny.'

'Fancy,' exclaimed Laurence, tossing up his head contemptuously, 'fancy not knowing a wood-chuck when you meet one!'

'Do you?'

'I!' He went on reading: 'The hunted fox came to him for protection' ('that's more than it ever did to you, Hilary'); 'the wild squirrels——'

'Fourteen and fourpence, carried forward. You see, Hilary, so——'

'“The wild squirrels,”' with deepening emphasis, '“have been seen to nestle in his waistcoat.”—Never tell me again that animals are particularly tame with you, Hilary. Who ever saw a wild squirrel nestling in your waistcoat?'

'As if little Brown Bess did not sit on my shoulder by the hour, and eat out——'

'Hilary!' severely, 'did Mrs. Atkins pay in on the 5th of June, or did she not? There is nothing but a great blot against her name.'

'How should I know? Of course she did if there is a blot.'

Hilary, flushed and laughing, half angry and half pleased, looked like the Hilary of old times. Geoffrey, attracted by Laurence's nonsense as he crossed the hall, had come behind Hilary's chair, and was standing with his hand on her shoulder.

'Oh, Laurie, do be quiet!'

'No; listen. “He would thrust his hand into a pool, and bring out a bright, panting fish, lying undismayed”——*undismayed*, observe——“in the palm of his hand.”'

'American fish, I guess,' dryly observed Geoffrey.

Rhona thought them very childish, as she dutifully resumed her post at Mrs. Bloomfield's elbow. It all sounded trivial in her ears. Even Mrs. Atkins's bank deposit sunk into insignificance; for, by this same waning sunset light, which Mrs. Bloomfield was trying to catch for the deciphering of her account-book, John Mowbray must even now be reading those sad, strange pages.

An hour or two later the two brothers were dining together at the Abbey, and diligently canvassing the political situation. Both of course were staunch adherents of their hereditary creed, but they contrived to differ on minor points as widely as was possible for men belonging nominally to the same party.

Arguments were common enough between them, but this evening neither put any heart into the discussion, which waxed duller and duller by degrees. Both speakers were thinking about something else, and as soon as they had finished dinner, each took refuge in a patriarchal arm-chair beside the library fire, and subsided into a comfortable brotherly silence.

John Mowbray leant back, genuinely engrossed in his own thoughts, whereas Adrian pretended to read the evening paper, all the while meditating how to bring out, with a casual, unstudied air, a question he was bent on asking.

The library at the Abbey was an endlessly long room, narrow, lofty, and lined up to the groined ceiling with books. At one end a couple of shaded reading lamps and a wood-fire, a mass of glowing embers, out of which clear flames flickered and quivered up and down, made but small inroads on the solid darkness. Sometimes the outline of a marble bust started out of the shadow, as a jet of flame played fitfully across Socrates's wrinkled forehead, or lighted up the beautiful face of the young Augustus. A solitary lamp burned far away at the other end of the room—a tiny island of brightness, parted from its fellows by a vast spreading ocean of gloom.

Presently a gleam of silver athwart the blackness, and

an approaching step heralded the arrival of coffee. Adrian Mowbray seized the opportunity to fling aside his paper.

'As usual, nothing in the *Globe*,' throwing its pale pink sheets on to the floor, and pushing back with his foot an ashy, half-charred log that had tumbled out of a glowing fire-cavern on to the hearth. 'Well, John. I hope I did not bring you down here uselessly. Were you able to enlighten Miss Somerville's perplexity this afternoon?'

John got up and stood with his back to the fire. 'To tell you the truth, I don't think I am at liberty to discuss that subject with you!'

'All right,' answered Adrian impatiently. 'Please yourself. All I care to know is whether your coming did her any good.'

'I understood from her that you knew nothing about it.'

'Well, I never said I did know.'

'And I really don't understand your interest in the matter.'

'Don't you? Why, as it was I who told you to come——'

'By the way, so it was. It had slipped my memory, but I am much obliged to you. You did perfectly right in sending for me.'

'I am glad to hear it,' very dryly.

'But for the rest——'

'For the rest my interest is very soon explained. It is simple enough. Nothing that concerns Rhona Somerville can fail to be interesting to me, seeing that I hope to have her for my wife!'

John turned round with a great start, and stared at him.

'Your wife?' he presently said almost in a whisper. 'Your wife?' And he stood transfixed with his eyes wide open.

Adrian nodded and said no more. Already he repented having betrayed his secret. He had not meant to say a word about it, but John's cool assumption that he had neither part nor lot in any of Rhona's concern vexed him, and stung him into an unpremeditated confidence.

Poor John, on his side, was thunderstruck. Such a

catastrophe as Adrian's falling in love with Rhona had never dawned on his imagination. It took his breath away. For, though guiltless of the faintest wish to marry her himself, he certainly did consider that he had some sort of vested right in the disposal of her hand. He was her father's friend—the undisputed guardian and counsellor of the whole family—Adrian was a mere acquaintance whom he had introduced to them; an outsider, whose only connection with them was through him. He saw now that he had done wrong in throwing them together, for as to Adrian's marrying Jasper Somerville's daughter, it was an impossibility—it would be a calamity. He must lose no time in entering his protest.

'You propose to ask Miss Somerville to marry you? Do I understand you rightly?'

'Well, it appears so.'

John gathered himself together and spoke with deliberation. 'That is a step that I never could be prevailed upon to sanction.'

Adrian smiled slightly.

'It is simply and entirely out of the question.'

'May one ask why?'

'She would not marry you.'

Again his brother could not refrain from smiling. 'My dear John, do you know, you almost tempt me to question whether there are not more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

John went on unheeding. 'You must not ask her. You have not the right.'

'You think not? But surely that is a question for my decision—and hers.'

'Not so. Mind, I am not asking whether she may or may not like you as a man—I daresay she does. That is a point of minor importance.'

'You can't expect me to agree with you there.'

'There are graver interests at stake.' John paused, and stood looking down at his brother. 'By what right,' he asked presently, in a stern and authoritative tone, 'by what right would you imperil her soul's welfare, or her peace of

mind? Would her father have given her to a man of your way of thinking, do you suppose? or would you dare yourself to expose her to the misery, the certain misery, of contact with your dreary creed?’

Adrian got up and stood facing his brother. He put his hand upon the high chimney-shelf and looked down into the glowing fire-cavern. For full a moment he made no answer: then he said in a low voice:

‘My creed, as you call it, need not trouble her. She need never fear my forcing it on her. Why should I? Whatever opinions I may hold, they are not of a nature to harm her. Nor am I in the habit, for that matter, of discussing them with any one who has not been compelled by unhappy necessity to adopt them—least of all with her.’

‘Ah,’ interrupted John.

‘On the contrary, I would guard her from all knowledge of differences between us.’

‘And you suppose that to be possible?’

‘Yes,’ said Adrian, bending down his head, ‘I do;’ and after a moment he added, ‘though with such a woman as Rhona Somerville it would be difficult, perhaps.’

‘It is manifestly impossible.’

‘God knows,’ Adrian continued, ‘God knows I would not disturb her happy faith, poor child!’

‘As a man of honour, you could not.’

‘Rubbish, John; you are running into extremes. It is no question of honour. Leave that to me. But feeling for her as I do, if I brought perplexity or unrest into her life——’

‘As you must——’

‘It would be a pity,’ ended Adrian, altering his sentence.

‘You may sneer as much as you please——’ began John, but Adrian turned on him fiercely:

‘Let me alone. I haven’t asked for your advice. What do you, and such as you, know of my opinions? Did you ever give them a fair hearing? How can you tell what men of finer fibre, and to the full as much honesty as yourself, have to go through in their search after truth?’

John slightly shrugged his shoulders. 'I confess that I have but little sympathy with so-called honest doubt.'

'The other looked at him, suddenly quieted. 'God forgive you,' he said gravely. 'It is men like you—good and earnest men, beyond a doubt—who help on the cause of scepticism in the world.'

'One may feel sincere compassion——' but again John was cut short.

'It is not needed, your compassion. No, rather far my suspended judgments, than your arrogant self-satisfaction. We have said quite enough on this subject. You give me fair warning that I am to look on you as an enemy to my hopes—so be it. What more can there be to say?'

'I speak only from a stern sense of duty.'—This time John came to a standstill of his own accord. He did not wait to be interrupted. For, as the words passed his lips, it flashed across him that they were not strictly true—it was not a stern sense of duty, pure and unadulterated, that prompted them. Rigidly honest, he must needs admit that other motives had mingled themselves with his very sincere wish to shield Rhona from harm or danger. He had been indignant on his own account; there was no denying it. His position, and what he considered his authority, had been ignored, and he had been coolly thrust into the background himself. His opinion even was not asked for. Moreover, he had been taken utterly by surprise, and, of all things in the world, John most disliked being surprised, and made, as he felt he had this evening, to look like a fool. 'Had the slight to his self-love made him arrogant and unjust?' John sternly asked himself. 'Had he been perfectly unprejudiced and sincere?'

Thought after thought crowded over him. Leaving his own share of blame to be apportioned later, he presently turned himself to consider his brother's side of the question. He now remembered that there had of late often been moments when he judged Adrian far less harshly than just now, when his altered way of speaking on many subjects had surprised John, and constrained him to confess that there was far more of regret than of triumph in his tone. John

looked at him now and pondered. Adrian had flung himself back in his chair, and was sitting unemployed, with one hand shading his eyes. More and more John's mind misgave him.

He began to speak at last in an odd, anxious, strangled voice. 'Adrian,' he said, 'look here. It is just possible that I may be mistaken, at least to some degree. I may have misjudged you, and it is my earnest desire to be just. Once or twice lately it has struck me that your opinions (excuse me if I offend you) may have been undergoing some degree of modification.'

Adrian made a movement of weariness. 'All right, John,' he said, without looking up, 'never mind my opinions. It is very little use discussing them. They would not be satisfactory to you, I daresay. Let them be.'

He only wanted to be let alone. He could not occupy himself about John's sense of justice, much less recount his own mental history, with a view to letting his brother judge how nearly he was fitted to be trusted with Rhona's well-being. He only asked just now to be left to contemplate in peace the fair ideal presence that his own words had called up. The act of speaking of his dream seemed to make it a reality, and he could fancy that Rhona, the love of his manhood, full of beautiful youth and winning grace, the creature 'he could most desire to honour, serve, and love,' was standing before him. John's voice jarred on his ear.

Very seldom before had he put into words this new love which glorified his life. Once he had spoken of it to Lady Helen Grantley, and his recollection of her vivid sympathy, of her brown eyes sparkling with eager interest, of her looks and gestures, made poor John standing up there, and denouncing him in the firelight, appear by contrast all the more grim and antagonistic.

John had been so utterly taken aback too—so provokingly astonished; whereas Lady Helen, understanding at half a word, found it the most natural as well as the most delightful thing in the world, and was all alight with sympathy at a moment's notice. In a second her quick woman's wit had taken in the complications of the situation.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, putting both her hands before her eyes, 'I see! and I who asked you to give my poor cousin Val a helping hand. How could I be so stupid?'

'It is because of that, that I feel bound to tell you now, and to try and get your benediction.'

'Oh, why did I ever speak to you of Val?'

'Well,' he said with a smile, 'it was rather a blow, there is no denying it—your confiding poor dear Val and his fortunes to my keeping. I had only just found out how things were going with me, and when I met you at Clyffe I had half made up my mind to tell you all about it. But you forestalled me.—Do you remember the day you asked me to have him at Wildenhall?'

'Of course I do, and my telling you how devoted he was to Rhona Somerville.'

'And how devoted she was to him. That was the unkind cut—for you thought it was an old affair settled between them years ago. But for that, I believe even then I should have taken you into my confidence, and have told you that Val was welcome to come, but that he must fight his own battle, for I should do my best to cut him out!'

'Oh, why didn't you?'

'I had no business to interfere, after I was told that they understood one another. Besides, you had trusted me. I was only glad that I had kept my own counsel.'

'Yes, and how good you were!—how long you let that poor boy stay on at Wildenhall, and what weary work it must have been to keep aloof yourself!'

'I was bound to give him a fair chance. Later, I confess, it would have been harder.'

'And Val never guessed! You had to look on and let him waste all the time.'

He smiled a little.

'Honestly, I must acknowledge that I soon saw he had no chance. No, Lady Helen, you owe me no gratitude. Only give me your good wishes now if you can.'

'Oh, how heartily!' she exclaimed, jumping up, and coming to shake hands with him. 'How happy Keith will be! I lost my heart to her that first Sunday at Wildenhall

—that day, you know, when she played the organ, and the sun shone on her face, and Keith said she had long eye-lashes. I think she is such a darling—there is a charm about her that is greater than mere beauty.’

He coloured a little, and looked down on the ground, and then he said in a low voice :

‘You are quite right, Lady Helen. There is.’

It had been harder work to stand aside in the first flush of his hopes, and suffer Val to try and win Rhona before his eyes, than he had chosen to let Lady Helen guess. Her confidence, and her request to him, had been a heavy blow, and the ordeal of self-restraint and enforced silence which he had undergone made the past winter one of the most irksome periods of his life. But he carried his loyalty to the utmost ; and when Val Fitzhugh finally left Wildenhall, Adrian went away too, lest he should seem, even in his own eyes, to be taking too quick an advantage of his freedom.

Val turned to the sea for consolation, and got afloat as quickly as he could. Just before he sailed, Adrian went to take leave of him on board, and during the few hurried moments that they passed together, he asked the young man whether he could bear to hear of him as a rival.

Val stood the shot gallantly enough.

‘I might have guessed. How could you help caring for her? Of course you’ll get her,’ he said, turning his flushed face aside ; ‘I hope,’ with a gulp, ‘you will.’ Then, after a minute’s reflection : ‘I say, it was awfully good of you to give me that chance. I ought to be tremendously grateful. So I am, of course—only——’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Adrian, ‘I know, never mind.’

The first lieutenant was called fifty ways at once. At the last moment he rushed back to Adrian, but there was only time for a grip of the hand, a kindly look, and a muttered, rather husky ‘Good luck’ from Val. And so they parted.

At last Adrian was free. He hurried off to Wildenhall, there to be met by John with words of warning, which for Rhona’s sake were not lightly to be set aside.

On the whole, John’s brief visit had not been productive of all the good that was expected from it. He himself went

away to the full as uneasy in mind as the two he left behind him. Rhona, watching eagerly for him in the morning, found him strangely absent, gentle, and, as she thought, unhelpful. To tell the truth, last night's interview with his brother had wellnigh driven the recollection of her perplexity out of his head.

'Yes, I am sorry for you,' he said as he gave back the book, the contents of which he could scarcely recall at the moment; 'I daresay it did make you unhappy. Poor Rhona!'

'Oh!' she exclaimed; 'is that the only comfort you have to give?' for he seemed to be going away, without saying any more.

'Comfort!' he echoed vaguely. 'Oh yes, certainly, you must take comfort. There is a great deal to give you comfort.'

'Tell me what?'

He passed his hand over his forehead.

'Well—after all, you know that this journal is very old. And—there is nothing fresh to distress you, though it comes on you as a new thing. For him it was all over and done with, many years ago.'

'And that is the best you have to say?'

Her tone of indignant despair roused him, and he looked at her as if he was trying to collect his thoughts.

'I don't see why you are so miserable. His peace is perfect now; his rest unbroken,' and John drew a breath of unwonted weariness. 'For years his faith was strong and clear. Try and forget this one dark time.'

'As if I could—as if I ever could!'

'Come, Rhona, you are exaggerating. You have made no effort to forget,' this was more like John. 'You dwell too much on all this. I allow that it was not unnatural at first; but you are losing sight of common sense now, and all your ideas are getting out of proportion. Dear me, the present is surely perplexing enough—be reasonable, and don't go back perpetually on the past. At all events there is nothing to be done, you must speak and act as if all this had never been written.'

'And what of your book, which you want everybody to read? How much is to be told of all this?'

'Nothing,' John answered with decision; 'nothing at all.'

'It is to be hidden then, and glossed over. We are to tell a part, but not all the truth. Is that what you wish?'

'You are to keep back nothing which could be of use.'

'How can you tell? How can you be sure? Supposing that it would have been his wish to have all told—all or nothing—what then? That would be more brave, surely, more honest, more like him, than to keep back the sad bits of his life, just to save ourselves from pain?'

John laid down the hat he had taken up.

'Well, if you take it in that way, I see something in it. You may be right from a certain point of view.'

'Very well,' Rhona broke in with a sudden change of front that fairly confounded him. 'Then if I am right, you must find some one else to write your book. Wait a minute, and I will bring you back all the papers. I will have nothing more to do with them—nothing, never again—only wait an instant.'

She was flying away, but he caught her arm.

'Stop, Rhona. For pity's sake be calm—hear reason. What have I said that you can take up like this? What have you been driving at all this time? It is hardly possible for me to form a fair judgment at a moment's notice; and besides,' he took out his watch, 'I have not an instant to spare.'

'You are going away—now.'

'My dear Rhona, I am sorry. I have told you that I have no choice in the matter. I will think—I will write. People's minds are differently constituted; your view may be more just than mine——'

'Time's up, John,' said Adrian, coming in at the hall door. He stopped a moment when he saw Rhona's face, and then went on as if he had not noticed her. 'You have barely time to catch the train as it is—if you must go.'

'Go! of course I must go. I am ready—Rhona, I will write. I will think it over calmly. I will—good gracious, that is the half-hour.'

He was gone.

CHAPTER XV

‘Great is truth.’

‘YES,’ said Rhona, aloud to herself, ‘he is gone.’

She threw the book he had returned to her on to the table, and its leaves, loosened by much handling, fell apart and fluttered down on to the floor. As she stooped to gather them up, the wheels of the dogcart were heard to grate on the gravel outside.

The next moment Adrian Mowbray came back into the hall and hurriedly approached her.

‘He brought you no help—I knew how it would be. His coming was worse than useless. Let me try what I can do. No, don’t turn away. If you only knew how nearly I have already guessed this trouble of yours.’

‘John told me to forget it,’ said Rhona, ‘but I cannot. I cannot forget.’

‘John is a fool. Of course you can’t. What trouble was ever cured by pretending to forget it?’

‘But you would not understand——’

‘Miss Somerville, you are wrong.’ He spoke with a concentration of energy and passionate feeling, the like of which she had never seen in him before. ‘I know how I have been represented to you—as a shallow and complacent agnostic, ready to reject everything that he cannot understand by the light of his own reason, with an horizon bounded by his own narrow vision, and a diabolical delight in witnessing the agony of those who have lost faith, however unwillingly, in a certain set of formulas and dogmas. I have long known how John thinks of me, and I don’t

very much care—but that you should be taught to judge so falsely of me is, I confess, rather hard to bear.'

'I do not judge you at all,' she said, wondering at the suppressed emotion in his voice. 'Why should I? No. I have always thought you were sorry, and so did my father. He used to think——'

She stopped.

'Ah, I always believed that the master had more tolerance than the disciple, and a broader outlook. I judged him by his writings, until John told me——'

'What?' asked Rhona, startled. 'What did John tell you of my father?'

'That speculative thought was entirely beyond his sympathy; nay, that he looked upon it as a sin; that he classed all who had the misfortune to differ with him as heretics.'

'How did John dare to say so?'

'I think John may have been mistaken. Never mind that. Miss Somerville, John is a good man, but his groove of thought is a contracted one, and to be narrow often makes a man unconsciously cruel. Sometimes I fear that he may have been cruel to you.'

'Cruel to me!'

'Yes. I thought so, when I saw how he thrust on you the task of writing your father's life. I hold that it was a cruelty to force you to attempt it. You were not fit for it. Even I, a stranger, could see that.'

'Oh no, I was not fit. I was not fit indeed.'

'From the very first it has been to you a grievous burden. I knew it must be. I knew there must be passages in his life of thought, in any man's life, that would surprise, nay, that would shock you.' He paused, seeing the colour that flushed her face, and the quick instinctive gesture with which she swept together the papers near her, and held them within her arms. She held up her hand to stop him.

'He was the highest, the noblest——'

'Do I not know it? I believe that those writings of his which you guard so jealously, would draw me to him

in closer sympathy than you can dream of, if you would but let me see them. Will you not trust them to me? They are breaking your heart. Only let me try if I cannot comfort you.' *

'Oh no,' she cried. 'Oh no.'

'You need not be afraid—you might trust me. I would approach them in a spirit of the deepest reverence. I think I could reassure you; and, for my own part, if he was what I believe him to have been, those papers would be to me of a value I can scarcely describe.'

She shook her head, and the tears gathered in her eyes, and fell on the worn cover of the book. 'You mistake,' she said; 'I wish it was as you think.'

'No, I don't mistake. The very love you bear your father's memory——'

'Oh, I love him, you cannot tell how I love him.—Listen, then; you seem to know so much, I will tell you all about it.' She raised her eyes and stood thinking for a moment. 'Other daughters may have loved their fathers, but there was never any father like mine—no child that was treated as my father treated me.'

'He was a great man—you know he was a great man? Yes,' in answer to his gesture, 'I am glad you know it. I gloried in his fame—but I knew that to *him*, earthly fame was a poor, worthless, unsought-for thing. He had passed beyond it. The love of God had so taken possession of his heart that there was no room for selfish ambition left. So when they began to say his life ought to be written, I knew that it would have been no gratification to him that the world—as the dean said—should learn what a great man it had lost. He would not have cared *that*,' she flung her hand up as if she was tossing away some trifle light as air, 'not *that*, to be remembered, talked of, written about, as a great author and thinker. Oh no. It was *my* pride, mine and mother's, and your brother John's perhaps, that cared about his being known and prized. You understand that? Still, he would gladly have let his life be written if it could help any one, if it could be of use to one poor struggling soul—I don't care who. Father would

have died to help one poor soul in need. He would have told us to do what was best, and not to think of his own tastes and wishes. That was what poor Laurie could not understand.'

She spoke rapidly, standing straight up with the book clasped by both hands against her breast.* He, leaning against the high table, interrupted her neither by word nor movement.

'And so the dean set himself to work. He got together many of his letters, and his friends wrote such wonderful and beautiful things that we grew, my mother and I, to feel as if even we had never known quite all he was. But,' she stopped for a moment, 'above all else, my father loved truth, as I think a brave man must. He did not fear it—he said it must prevail. And when it turned out that there was no one at hand who could begin the work but me, I remembered that, and I was not so much afraid. I thought it would be very easy to tell the truth, and that by simply telling it the picture of him would be made most lifelike. But now I don't know. Oh, I was too confident—too secure—I did not know. I never guessed——'

Her voice failed, it was only after a struggle that she steadied it again.

'They told me that the story of his life was meant only to give help. And, therefore, all that was difficult or perplexing in it must be left out—for that to put stumbling-blocks in the way of others would be contrary to the only aim he ever had—that of doing good. And I have tried to believe it, but——'

'Go on,' said Adrian; 'you are a brave woman.'

'But more and more the question puzzled me—would he, who was so true, have thought it honest to choose the part of truth we wished to tell? and to hide—to hide——'

Again her voice was choked.

'I was utterly surprised—he was always so fearless—so calm. I thought he had fought a good fight. I thought he never quailed for a day—never suffered a single pang of doubt. Oh, father, father!—I thought that in the hottest of the battle he had not faltered. I knew others failed—

but not he. I was proud of the strength that made him so tender, and able to teach others to win, as he had always won.'

'But did he always win?' asked Adrian, almost in a whisper, laying a heavy hand on hers.

'No, no,' she answered, sobbing; 'he failed—he failed—at least, for a time he failed.'

A smile stirred Adrian's grave lip—a smile that betokened sudden relief, and yet that was touched with tender compassion for her grief.

'Poor child!' he said.

'His faith gave way—he passed through dark days. It has broken my heart to think that he could fail. No one must know it—no one must ever hear it.'

He touched her bowed head gently with his hand.

'Yet, I believe, that to know it would heal the hearts of many.'

Startled and puzzled, she looked up at him.

'Will you trust me with those papers? Believe me, I do not ask it idly, or from curiosity.'

'I ought never to have seen them—he would not like to know that I had. They were not for his child to read. Oh, I never thought his faith could fail—it breaks my heart.'

He hesitated. Even now he felt it hard to speak about himself, but, bending down towards her, he said a few words in a low voice.

Rhona raised her eyes still brimming with tears, and gave him a quick, glad, wondering look.

At last—at last she understood that by her father's failure and her own, a great blessing had been won. A good work had been wrought—for one man at least—for where the major key of triumph and unbroken victory palled on an incredulous and experienced ear, those minor chords that told of suffering and struggle, and of, for a time, defeat, touched and filled a listener with hope.

All that day, after Adrian went away, Rhona moved about with a wonderful sense overshadowing her of peacefulness and relief, and it was with her still when she awoke to the gay spring sunshine of the next morning. Her

burden seemed to have fallen from her, and her father to be restored to her, such as she had always known him. All the perplexity and misery of the last weeks had vanished. In some way she scarcely understood, the riddle was being solved, the mystery made plain, and she might be at rest. All this was not quite logical perhaps, but it is possible to be very glad, or very sorry, without the help of logic. Rhona had suffered herself to dwell exclusively on one thought, until, like the creeping mist on a wintry afternoon, it had spread and risen, and blotted out the whole horizon from view. Now the fresh air and the pure light of a new morning were sweeping away the vapours, and each hidden landmark stood out again in the sunbeams.

Thus she remained much uplifted, and awaiting with great calmness John's expected letter, which presently arriving, proved to be a bulky parcel, crammed to overflowing with rather dingy books, on the top of which lay a remarkably small note.

John, on his return to London, had found a hard day's work cut out for him, ending with an evening service for working men at which he was bound to preach.

At rare intervals an educated hearer slipped in among his rough, unlettered audience. One such, who chanced on this night to be present, was in the habit of keeping a journal, and he thus recorded his impressions of the preacher he had been listening to: 'He has rather a remarkable face; I have been struck by it before, but to-night he had less the air of a teacher than of one who was himself seeking earnestly the answer to some question. There was an odd, eager, listening expression on his face—the look of a soldier who hears the trumpets ringing, the word of command sounding, but indistinct and far away, so that his ears had to be painfully strained to catch what it was all-important for him to hear. A raised head, raised eyelids and eyebrows, a lined forehead, only in the mouth an expression of resolute acquiescence and patient waiting that was somewhat at variance with the anxious look on the upper part of the face.'

John knew and loved the hearers to whom he preached;

he cared deeply for their weary lives, for their sorrows, their temptations, their hopes, but to-night he was glad when his work was done, and he was able to shut his door and to sit down by himself to think. Presently he lighted his reading-lamp, and fell to turning heaps of dusty old books out of the cupboard to which they had long been relegated, chiefly ragged old reviews and periodicals, begrimed with London smoke. These he piled on his table, and he read from one after another till late at night. At last he threw them all aside, and going to his writing-table, wrote these few lines :—

‘DEAR RHONA,

‘I cannot at this moment see my way to offering you any advice. I can only put before you some materials, out of which you may be able to form an opinion for yourself. It has become impossible for me to judge for you dispassionately. Read these articles which I have marked—old writings of my brother’s. Read them, in as far as you are able, with your father’s eyes, seeing them as he would, recalling when you can, what he actually said respecting some of them. I believe you to be no unfair judge of his habitual tone of thought and opinion. Let his judgment guide you in the hour of perplexity which I see approaching you. Further than this I am unable to advise. I write because I imagine that you will be expecting to hear from me.

‘Yours faithfully,

‘J. E. MOWBRAY.’

It never struck poor John that his words must appear to Rhona to go quite beside the mark. Overworked, with strung nerves and throbbing pulses, he was not capable just now of weighing difficulties and giving wise advice. The new question too, which concerned Adrian, had so absorbed his attention, as to blot out all remembrance of the subject for which Rhona claimed his help. That belonged to the past, he could only think of the present. Joined to a certain loyalty of affection for his elder brother,

which almost surprised himself, there rose in his mind the glimmering of a fresh doubt. Might not Rhona's influence, and the responsibility of her welfare, be the best thing in the world for Adrian? But then how far ought Adrian's happiness to weigh with him? Was it his duty to stand between it and him? He could not tell.

Nor could Rhona tell at first what to make of the queer heap of superannuated periodical literature which had descended on her. John's object in sending it was slow in dawning on her. She read eagerly all that bore Adrian Mowbray's signature, first with faint stirrings of memory, and then with a great sinking of heart. For it was like the clouds returning after the rain, the ghosts so lately laid, rising up under a fresh guise to haunt her, and to scatter her newly-found peace of mind to the four winds. A day or two later, after she had seen Adrian Mowbray again, John's object in laying on her this new burden became clear.

The next time Adrian went to the Grange he chanced to encounter Hilary at the door, and she, never greatly burdened by ceremony, when she heard that he wanted to see Rhona, straightway conducted him to her little sitting-room.

'Oh yes. I know she's there,' said Hilary, as she clattered up the stairs in front of him. 'Of course you can go in—I need not go and ask, dear me, no. She is only reading a book,' and she flung the door wide open.

'I have come to thank you for your trust,' began Adrian, entering, but as his eyes fell on Rhona, he forgot what he was going to say. The sight of her stirred his heart with sudden pity and tenderness. She looked so young, so lonely, and somehow, to his fancy, so in need of help and comfort, as she sat there at a table covered with books, from which she lifted her eyes with a weary and perplexed face, like a child puzzling over its lesson.

He made two steps forward and knelt down beside her chair, taking her hand in both of his, and holding it against his heart. 'My child, you cannot get on alone. Put it all away for a little while. And then, Rhona, I came to ask—

not yet, not now, but later, when I see things clearer—give me your work to do.’

His hand trembled, his face softened into a look of intense longing and protecting tenderness.

‘You know I love you.’

‘Yes,’ said Rhona simply, and they were silent for a minute or two, he still looking into her face, and holding her hand against his heart, till she tried with a quivering sigh to draw it away from him.

‘John——’ she began.

Adrian rose abruptly to his feet.

‘John is not to come between us now; I will not have it,’ he said vehemently. ‘What has John to do with us?’

‘He sent these,’ said Rhona, pointing to the books with which the table was strewn.

‘Well, what of them?’ he opened one, caught sight of his own name, and let it fall again.

‘John said I was to read them with my father’s eyes.’

‘Your father’s eyes?’

‘And I must do as father would wish,’ she went on, looking up imploringly in his face. ‘I promised. Once I disappointed him—long ago; he was not angry, but he was so very, very kind that I vowed to myself never to do again what would grieve him, much less now——’

‘Would it grieve him that I should love you?’

‘He did not think like this,’ said Rhona in a whisper, pointing to the books.

‘Are you going to judge me out of these?’ he asked gently. He took up one after another, reading a sentence at random here and there, his lips whitening as he read. ‘Hush! I do not wish to bias you; you shall do as you think fit. It is odd to see those old, dead, forgotten words, brought up again as witnesses against me—perhaps it is fair retribution. I do not question John’s good faith. I know he is honest, and no doubt he has some reason which suffices to himself for dealing me what looks like a stab in the dark.’

‘I don’t suppose John meant to be unkind.’—His letter lay open on the table, and she pushed it towards Adrian.

He glanced through it, and gave it back with a stern, melancholy smile.

‘Just so. Well, every one must act according to his light. But, Rhona—you——’

‘I must keep my promise,’ she said breathlessly.

‘Is that my sentence?’

‘Oh, don’t look like that—don’t make it too hard for me!’

‘I will not make it hard at all, if I can help it.’ A pause. ‘Shall I go away?’

She held the hand he held out to her fast in both hers.

‘Oh!’ she cried, with a strange appeal to him. ‘You think that I am wrong?’

‘Yes. But this is a matter of life or death to me. I will put no pressure on you.’

‘Tell me,’ she said again, ‘what ought I to do? Oh, tell me, please!’

He stood still, looking at her.

‘Judge me by what I am now—not by what I wrote then. It would be more just, though I do not say it will alter your decision.’

‘Ought it? Is all this’—vaguely pointing to the table—‘clear to you now?’

The question made him smile. It was so simply put. ‘All clear, my Rhona? No; it is not. I have no wish to cheat you. I am making it my sole business to think it out. You—God bless you for it—put something like a clue into my hands the other day. I must follow it out alone, and where it may lead me I cannot tell you. Possibly not where it led your father.’

Her eyes lighted up with hope; now her face fell again.

‘But, listen. I honestly believe that he would have been in no wise troubled by that. He knew—few better—that truth is many sided; that it may be by the most widely-differing roads men reach the goal.’

Rhona stretched out her arms wearily over the books on the table, and laid her head down on them. Something in the gesture and perplexed attitude reminded Adrian of Olga, and of his last hopeless discussion with her. He said

to himself, with sudden and impatient bitterness, that it was his fate always to fight with shadows. The next instant the thought was called back. It would be unfair indeed to compare Rhona, faithful and loyal, striving to withhold the love and trust that wellnigh overmastered her, until she knew how far it was right for her to bestow it, with the poor, wayward, untaught child, who had neither will nor strength to fight down a superstition for his sake.

They were both silent for a time, and then the luncheon-bell went clanging through the house. There is ever some luncheon-bell in life—some insignificant, imperative, trifling interruption. Often it is just as well, and more words would but darken counsel. Clang-clang went the sonorous old clapper of the Grange bell, and neither Rhona nor Adrian dreamed of disputing its authority.

Only, 'You will be patient,' he said, as he followed her downstairs.

She did not speak, but turned half round and looked up at him.

He went away through the porch out into the sunshine, carrying with him the remembrance of the look in Rhona's face as she stood on the old black staircase, one fair little hand laid on the carved railing, and her head turned back to give him her silent answer. He judged it to be more fair, at whatever cost to himself, to leave her for some time, undisturbed. Moreover, his library-table was encumbered with no-longer-to-be-ignored telegrams and summonses, trebly underscored, to most important and certain divisions in the House of Commons. Till Whitsuntide he and Rhona did not meet again.

When he returned at the beginning of the holidays, he was alone as before, and the only guest who followed him after a day or two was the artist, Denis Delorme, come self-invited, to work at his friend's half-finished portrait.

The summer was in all the glory of its youth and freshness, rich in perfume and colour, as the trees were rich in blossom, Mr. Delorme, half painter, half poet, fell, directly he arrived, into a species of ecstasy, and walked about, demonstratively sniffing the air, flinging himself down to

roll among the clover tufts in the flowery grass, sighing, and apostrophising the clear azure of the sky, in short energetic bursts of Italian rhyme.

Late in the evening he and his host came out on to the terrace-garden, overhanging the mere, where the fountain flung up its column of shivered silver, and the square fish-ponds glimmered in the twilight. It was the softest and sweetest of June nights, full of wind whispers, and of wandering whiffs of perfume from unseen syringa bushes. The moon was floating high along her upland path, with iron-gray gossamer clouds hanging about her face, veiling its radiance, so that the stiff pleasaunce, its clipped yews, its stretches of shaven grass, and its broad lines of gravel, lay in the dim mystery of darkness.

Denis Delorme leant against the stone balustrade, smoking his cigar, and looking down into the rippling sheet of water, on the smooth surface of which the moon cast bars of silver and little quivering rifts of light. To the left the mere swept away into the deep shadow of overhanging trees. The reeds rustled, and the water lapped against the stone steps, on which stood Adrian Mowbray looking back towards the house. The great mass of buildings loomed large and indistinct, only the pale blue glitter of the moon shone fitfully against one after another, of the long ranges of windows. Delorme was talking after his usual random fashion, rambling on from one subject to another, and receiving but scant answers from his meditative host.

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘and how fares it with our Lady down yonder, of the starry eyes and silver speech?’

‘Rhona Somerville? She is well!’

‘That’s right. I am glad to hear it. I am watching the moon count your windows, Adrian. What lines upon lines she has touched with her white pencil—too many by half for a man who elects to live alone.’

‘Too many by half indeed.’

‘So the moon thinks. You should take her into your counsels. I fancy she must affect the radiant maiden whom mortals called Rhona.—What a fine study in black and gray that same moon is making to-night, and what a charmed

silence she has spread around her. I believe that on such a night as this I can hear the grass growing out there in the park beyond the mere, like Fairy Fine-ear. Heigh ho ! only to think that last night I was dining at my club and quite contented !'

'Oh, who would go parading
In London, and masquerading,'

quoted Adrian, flinging the end of his cigar at a floating, shimmering, white vision in the water, that called itself a swan. The vision made an angry, noiseless glide forward, and wagged its tail violently to and fro.

'Who would go parading?' echoed Delorme. 'Why, you would ; and for the matter of that, so would I, worse luck, after a week of moonshine. But it is simply magical while the charm lasts. By the way, that cousin of yours that we met in the village to-day, coming from the station—the pretty hoyden—she is changed.'

'Yes,' said Adrian, 'she is changed. It is a pity, for she is not nearly so pretty as she used to be.'

'I don't admire pretty people.'

'Well, I do, and I always thought she would turn out beautiful ; but her face has lost its soft look of roundness, and a good deal of its bloom.'

'But how it has gained in expression. I have rarely seen a more pathetic face.'

'Why, she had that odd serious look even in her tom-boy days. It always struck me as quaint. Now, she positively looks almost gaunt at times.'

'Yes, those great blue eyes have sunk ; but what a soul there is looking out of them—what a force of expression ! The lines of struggle, and self-mastery, and endurance are all there.'

'My dear Denis, you always see twice as much as anybody else.'

'Well, it is my business. She has got one of my faces now—that cousin Hilary of yours. I should like to paint her. Last year I did not care for her.'

'It is only that she looks older than when you were here last time.'

'Bah! She will grow young again fast enough one day.—Adrian, what are you and Miss Somerville wasting your lives for?'

Adrian folded his arms and reflected. He had known that the question was coming out of all this mist of idle talk. His friend stared up at the moon, and hummed a little French song about her.

'You would not understand if I were to tell you.'

'Very probably not. May I try?'

'She is a very noble woman——'

'*Connu. Après ?*'

'No one must try and influence her, not you, or any other. I will not. She holds my future in her hands, and she shall be left free to do with it as she sees fit.'

'Surely. Only I hope she will soon see fit. Time flies.'

'Denis, you must not interfere. Leave her alone. Let her have time and breathing space to fight out her own battle——'

'I have heard nothing of a battle.'

'It is that which I should fail to make you understand. I should be talking Greek to you, if I were to try to explain the doubts and the scruples of a highly organised spiritual nature. Take this for granted—I cannot satisfy her.'

'You mean you cannot pronounce her shibboleths. Surely you are man enough to know how to give in decently to a woman's prejudices.'

'That is just what I expected you to say. I knew you would accuse her of prejudice. You know less than nothing of the intense reality of living faith and reverence there is in such an one as she is.'

The moon came out from behind the clouds, and a pillar of black shadow, the reflection from the tall, urn-surmounted pedestal near which they stood, fell sharply defined on the whitened gravel. Delorme pointed to it.

'You will let a shadow part you.'

'To her it is no shadow—nor to me. There was a time when I reasoned just as you do.'

Denis Delorme glanced up at the cold, bright face of the moon. 'A dead thing may cast a shadow!'

'I don't care to argue with you. We should arrive at no conclusion. I say that the spiritual life of the unseen world has never touched you yet. It is to you non-existent. Its language, and its morality therefore, can have no meaning to you. You can neither speak the one nor understand the other.'

'And yet, I believe that I could so manage my speech as to make myself understood, and certainly so as to hurt no one's feelings.'

'Ah, there is your mistake! You think a language of indulgent apology would serve your turn. You little know the absolute authority which challenges you, the high and lofty ground that is claimed and held as impregnable, by faith. That which you would be ready to shrug your shoulders at, and yield as a trifle of no moment, may be prized by another as a necessary, a vital, part of truth.'

'And you?' asked Denis, surprised. 'It seems then that you begin to see with the eyes of the faithful!'

'It may be that I see men as trees walking,' answered Adrian, with a grave smile; 'but I was not alluding to myself. As I told you, I have not attained the standard.'

'Nor ever will. We shall never all see alike—don't flatter yourself.'

'Who wishes it? Truth is far-spreading, and variance of thought is the condition of progress. The Divine purpose in the world is education.'

'Ah! have it your own way. I would not embark in a theological controversy for a kingdom. All'—and he put his arm affectionately over his friend's shoulder—'all I care for is your happiness, and I am sorry to see it in jeopardy. I can't bear to think of your throwing it away for the sake of what appears to me mere splitting of straws. I thought that you had found here your pearl of price——'

'So I have,' replied Adrian.

He had not spoken to Rhona since his return home,

and had only seen her in church on Sunday morning. She was not playing the organ, as usual, but sat rather out of sight in the shade of a pillar, where for a time he refrained from looking towards her. His first sight of her was while the Apostles' Creed was being said. Then his gaze sought her face, and rested there, when he found how unconscious of it she was. Evidently her thoughts had gone up higher. She stood looking towards the great painted East window, her eyes fixed on the robed and crowned figure of the risen and ascending Christ, which the shining of the morning sun behind it made dazzling to behold. Adrian saw her lips move, and imagined that he could hear her voice in the clear, oft-repeated 'I believe.' He could see how gravely glad and peaceful was her face, how steady the light in her eyes. Never before had she seemed so far away from him as at that moment. And ever since broken and detached sentences from the Articles of Faith had been floating in his brain, haunting him like snatches of half-unwelcome music: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty'—again—'I believe in His only Son our Lord.' Again and again the words, in their lofty and glad security, rang in his ears. Oftener still came the grand concluding words: 'I believe in the Life everlasting. Amen.' And there began to dawn on him some faint glimmering of what it meant to her to utter that solemn 'I believe,' the declaration of her faith.

He saw, perhaps, only by a reflected light as yet, but a day or two ago he could not have spoken to Denis Delorme as he had that night. Now, for the first time, he understood that by her love to her dead father, Rhona was rising on stepping-stones to higher things.

Denis Delorme presently broke the silence that had fallen on them.

'To turn to another subject, Adrian. They tell me you refused office the other day—you, the most ambitious man of my acquaintance, far and away. What on earth induced you to do that?'

Adrian hesitated.

'I may have had other fish to fry.'

'That means that you preferred being free to unravel that tangled metaphysical skein of yours, I suppose. Strange,' he added musingly, 'what an infinite fascination there must be about those speculations! Has the result been worthy of the sacrifice?'

'I think I have been long enough under cross-examination for one night, if it is all the same to you. Tell me something about yourself. How much work have you got through since I was at your studio? You had half a dozen pictures on the stocks then.'

'Ah, that reminds me. I mean you to give me an early sitting to-morrow morning, and, come what may, I must have Miss Somerville here to see your picture.'

'If she will come——'

'Leave that to me. Suppose we go to bed. I am going to get up at sunrise, and be out in the fields before the dew is off the grass.'

'Indeed! Well, anyhow, I daresay you may be downstairs by ten. You will find me at breakfast. Good-night.'

The same scene again—the fountains, terraces, swans, the square grass lawns, and the glassy moat round the house—only all now bathed in sunshine, instead of moonlight.

Denis Delorme had been as good as his word. He had brought all the Grange party to see his picture, and to wander about the silent, sunlit gardens of the Abbey. Rhona, as he had shrewdly calculated, was fain to come with the rest, since her absence would have seemed singular. No one at home guessed at the terms on which she stood with Adrian. She could not burden her gentle mother with her perplexity, Uncle Dick was the last man on earth she would have chosen as counsellor, nor were Geoffrey or Laurence likely to enter into her difficulties.

So Adrian Mowbray met her at the great gates of the courtyard, receiving her with a grave and measured courtesy that betrayed nothing of what it was to him to welcome her under his roof. Rhona's manner he thought perfect, in its

gentle and serious composure, all the more that she could not help her downcast eyes and deepening colour.

For once the formal pleasaunce looked gay and festive. Dick Heathcote, his hands in his pockets, sauntered along, his critical eye taking count of the sombre masses of evergreen, the stiffly clipped yews, the lack of blossom and colour. Laurence, and Geoffrey, and Nathalie had gathered round the fountain, the little maid screaming with delight at the gold fish, which Hilary, her sleeve soaked up to the elbow, was trying to capture in her hand. Half the party were laden with cowslip balls, and Denis Delorme, with a rustic straw hat in his hand, was just advancing devotedly, to kiss Rhona's hand, and present to her a fragrant cluster of lilies of the valley. Dogs lay about basking lazily on the sun-warmed pavement, with the one of exception of Scamp, who, having taken umbrage at the superior whiteness of the swans, stood on the steps with his legs very far apart, and barked at them insultingly.

And then everybody had to see Mr. Mowbray's picture. The artist invited criticism right and left, even while quietly contriving that Rhona should visit it accompanied only by himself and Adrian.

She saw a very sombre canvas, sombre as to background and surroundings. The face was one so clear-cut of outline, and from the darkness of the eyes and hair, so sharply defined in colour, that it might easily have made too vivid in tone—a staring likeness, as people say. But this was a very subdued picture altogether, and Rhona thought, at first sight, that it was not strikingly like. The keenness of the eyes was softened and shadowed, the sarcastic lines round the mouth and cheek very faintly suggested. Delorme had painted what he saw and knew—a grave, powerful, thoughtful countenance, and also an exceedingly melancholy one. The eyes, luminous and serious, but not piercing, looked full into Rhona's and startled her. Once or twice the real eyes had met and held hers in the same way.

'Now, Miss Somerville, he says I have made his nose too high. I appeal to you—what does he know about his nose?'

'Is it a good likeness?' asked Adrian, smiling.

'I think so,' she said slowly.

'There, Denis,' very triumphantly, 'she only *thinks* so. She is not sure.'

But Denis was watching the flitting colour, and the eyes that turned almost uneasily away from the portrait.

'I am satisfied,' he said quietly. 'The nose is all right, isn't it, Miss Somerville?' and he held open the door for her to pass out.

A little later the whole party had left the pleasure, and were wandering over a sweep of greensward, set in which stood the exquisite fragment of ruined chapel aisle and unroofed cloister. There, under the shelter of a broken cloister arch, 'Miss Nathalie's tea-table,' as her host called it, had been laid out, and if ever a 'presumptuous tea' (so named by the old gardener's wife) gladdened the eyes of youthful maiden, verily this particular repast deserved the title.

Nathalie's small head was in a fair way to be turned that afternoon—so many pretty speeches, and French bon-bons, such gigantic strawberries and admiring looks, such brown-bread ices, and hothouse peaches, had been showered upon her. Good-natured people conspired to spoil and pet her, if it was only to call up the proud and gratified smile on her blind guardian's face. And now the little figure was to be seen flying about the ruins in her summer frock, like a blue butterfly, her golden curls floating behind her, as she scrambled in hot pursuit of Laurence, from one crumbling bit of building to another, with a reckless grace that was quite unlike her usual dainty deliberation. The group, still gathered in the low sunshine round the table, laughed and cheered her on.

To the left of the group a long strip of the old boundary wall of the Abbey bordered the fruit garden, and pear-trees, gray with lichen, were trained against it. Nathalie, incited by applause to fresh deeds of daring, began to climb a ladder that stood against the wall. She heard Laurence's whistle on the other side, and hurrying to surprise him, clambered up the ladder, and thence stepped on to the flat coping at the top.

There fear suddenly overtook her. The wall was high, the coping narrow, and slippery with moss. Screaming lustily, she grasped at the top of the ladder, which began slowly to sway forwards. There was no one near at hand. Uncle Dick, Adrian, Rhona, Geoffrey came hurrying up as the child's shriek rang out; but Hilary was quicker than any of them. In an instant she was swinging herself up the wall by the branches of the pear-tree. A spring, a scramble, a shower of leaves on to the grass beneath, and she was beside Nathalie on the wall, and had caught up the terrified child in her strong young arms. It was a horrid moment for the lookers-on. Hilary's foothold was frightfully insecure. Her figure swayed backwards and forwards, and the ladder which Nathalie had let go fell with a crash on to the grass. But the next moment Laurence was underneath the wall—another, and Nathalie had been dropped safely into his outspread arms. Every one gathered round her as she lay white and limp, with closed eyes, upon his shoulder.

'Poor little dear! look, the colour is coming back into her lips.'

'Yes; but how pale she is.'

'No wonder. Don't tremble any more, little Nathalie. Drink a little water, darling.'

'Why, what's the matter with her?' asked Hilary, who, having quietly swung herself down again, was astonished to find Rhona kissing her in an agitated manner, and Geoffrey eagerly holding out both hands towards her.

'Why, child, you have saved her life. She isn't a bit hurt—really.'

'Then what is all this fuss about?' and Hilary roughly pushed aside his hand.

'Really, Hilary, you are so brave yourself, that it makes you quite hard-hearted,' said Rhona, laughing rather unsteadily.

'I *scorn* cowards;' and Hilary walked loftily away, while Geoffrey turned back to chafe Nathalie's little cold hands, and Laurence gazed down tenderly at the small, lovely white face on his shoulder.

Later many of them remembered the little scene.

CHAPTER XVI

‘Many waters will not quench love.’

It was a rainy June that year.

The rain fell in the morning from low-hanging, rolling clouds of mist. It rained at noon, albeit patches of intense blue shone brightly through holes and rents in the leaden sky. It rained at sunset, heavy drops pouring from clouds of pale, watery gold, amid long, narrow sun rays—arrows shot from the quiver of a quenched and conquered summer. And it still rained night after night, with a soft wind sighing, and a steady drip, drip, down on to the trees and grass.

The water meadows were flooded; the canal rose; then one bit after another of Hithersea fen became submerged. From the raised causeway of high road, passengers looked down on sheet after sheet of rain-dimpled water; on fields, the fences and gates of which just rose above the flood-mark; and on cottages, farmsteads, peat-stacks, hedgerow-trees, all standing deep-drowned, silent and forlorn.

Hilary used to spend half her day leaning over the low wall at the end of the vicarage garden, gazing sadly out over the waste of waters. That field was green with young wheat only a month ago, the sheep and cows were grazing over those vanished pasture-lands, dog roses trailed along those once flowery hedges. Now all was stillness and solitude, except when the eye caught a moving speck on the waters far away, where a boat glided through a farm-yard gate, and steered its course towards the blank upper windows of some abandoned house.

Strange, how a half-open gate, standing deep in water,

can give a finishing touch of melancholy to a picture. Perhaps it is because one remembers amid what rejoicings the heavily-laden wains passed through it last harvest time, or the cows that came past it, winding their way home to be milked on happier summer's afternoons, and the merry children of the farm who were wont to swing on its top rail.

To Hilary the whole country-side was full of sad suggestiveness, for the shining expanse of water, with its mocking glitter, simply meant ruin to friend and neighbour. The wasted promise of the spring lay heavy on her heart—the thought of the deserted homesteads, each with its individual story of hardship and suffering, haunted her by night and day.

The vicarage itself was damp, and very solitary, and a taint of mildew hung about it. Her grandfather was laid up with rheumatism, and the floods cut them off almost entirely from the outer world. Not that Hilary minded that. Her heart was with her people, in their time of need, and she had no thought but for the aid and shelter that it was possible to give them.

There was a great deal to be done, and fortunately, plenty of help at hand. Dick and Geoffrey Heathcote worked like horses, for much of the flooded country belonged to the Wildenhall estate, and Adrian Mowbray was a generous landlord. Still sickness followed hard in the track of the floods—low fever, rheumatism, ague.

Besides, Hilary's sympathy was of that minute, neighbourly kind, born of long-standing friendship and familiarity, that mourned over each well-known elbow-chair, and eight-day clock, and family press, that had belonged to the flooded houses. Sometimes it was a child's toy she found, washing about in the front garden—sometimes a poor drowned hen, and her brood of little chicks.

Saddest story of all to Hilary was that of a dear, gray sheep-dog—it hardly bore thinking of—such a wise, hard-working, kindly beast, the most dutiful, the most pains-taking!—somehow when the flock of sheep, of which he was the careful and tireless guardian, was driven away to

high and dry pastures, he had been forgotten—accidentally shut up in a barn, which was flooded a few hours later. Days afterwards his dead body was found floating on the water, the rough gray coat drenched and heavy, the patient eye pitifully half open.

Hilary had come with Dick Heathcote and Geoffrey on some mission of salvage to the farm. Their boat, heavily laden, rowed by a decrepid old underkeeper, and the farmer's shepherd, pushed slowly in through the wide folding-doors, into the great, dark barn. Little Nathalie, delighted at the novelty of rowing into a barn in a boat, was beside her guardian that day. Rover stood panting on the gunwale, passionately anxious to save everything he passed.

It was a sultry afternoon, now and again the sun glanced out, but for the most part an odd, lurid glow was spread over the waters. Midsummer was past, and the rain had ceased for many days. A steam of dim heat hung over the fens, interrupted by an occasional thunderstorm, with heavy, short showers, that raised the sinking watermark again.

As the boat glided in, a stray sunbeam struck through the open door of the barn, and quivered on the water. Close to it was the dog's gray head, the shepherd pointed to it with his stick.

'There 'cr be,' he said.

Hilary took his hand in hers.—Supposing it had been Rover! Her companions had left the boat, and were scrambling up a ladder into a hay-loft above.

'Yes, Nathan, I know; I am sorry for you,' she said gravely; 'these are the things that break down a man's courage and spirit.'

The shepherd shook his head.

'So 'ter were, Miss Hilra', so 'ter were. William' (he had only been Bill in life, poor fellow, but now he was gone it was more decorous to speak of him as William), 'William were allus a good servant to me—faithful and treu—I won't say nothing agin' that—faithful and treu he were, and won'erful sharp o' lambing time.'

'You must not reproach yourself too much for leaving him behind,' began Hilary.

'Noo, no, I don't du that, Miss Hilary. I don't 'proach myself, not along o' *him*. He were but a brute, tho' he were so trustà. 'Tis the 'atables fare to cut me up. I don't know how ever to 'count to myself for that there prime cheese and bacon, as got left behind i' the corner cupboard anenst the stair,—clean spoilt they are, in course! That's what fare to work on my missus's feelings. She thought a sight o' that there cheese and bacon.'

'Oh dear,' said Hilary; 'cheese and bacon!'

It was a little difficult for her to see things from this standpoint at a moment's notice.

'Cheese and bacon! Yes,' she repeated, 'it was a great pity. Still, you can get lots more cheese and bacon; but one fears the dear dog must have felt it hard, to be left to drown all alone.'

Nathan stirred the poor limp body gently with his stick.

'Yes, 'tis all over and done with for him now. He's got past his troubles.—That there bacon come to tenpence a pound—tenpence a pound!'

Presently Geoffrey Heathcote called Hilary to bring round the boat to one of the windows of the house, at which he was standing. There was a bad case of fever, he had been told, a mile or so away across the fen, which must be seen after immediately. He and Dick were going off at once, but he did not want to take Nathalie, lest the fever might be catching. Would Hilary take her home to the Grange? They could take the boat back over the fields, and so get on to the mere by the canal. He and Dick would make their way across in the farmer's punt, and old Wylie, the underkeeper, would go home with her and Nathalie.

'I want her to get home in time for her tea, please Hilary.'

Hilary looked wistful, but she said nothing, and presently Wylie pulled the boat slowly back through the straw-yard, once so gay and noisy with the triumphant crow of cocks, the grunt of pigs, the lowing of oxen, now so silent—the boat's keel brushed softly over buried heaps of straw.

'Keep a sharp look-out on little Nat,' called Geoffrey after them. 'She hasn't a notion of trimming a boat.'

'All right,' said Hilary absently. She sat gazing round over this strange world of waters—here the heads of a row of pollards marking a fence—there the top of a wooden bridge, which in ordinary times arched over a sluggish little stream—rails with reflections, that seemed to complete them in the water—a higher, black bank of peat—then sheet after sheet of white light, or slate colour, or blue, melting away against the distant rising ground that hid the mere. Beyond sloped the meadows of Wildenhall, its church spire towering against the sky, and hard by rose the twisted chimneys of the Grange. Farther south again, there was the great stretch of the park, and a gray fragment of ruin showing through the trees.

Close behind them the upper story and portico of the farmhouse stood above the water, and a clematis wound starry flowers round the window where Geoffrey still stood with his head bent forward, listening to the stroke of the oars.

'Good-bye, Hilary,' he shouted cheerily. 'Mind you look after Nathalie.'

'I am blowing you lots and lots of kisses,' cried the child's little silvery voice, as she stood up in the boat, with each hand pressed to her lips and waved to him in turn. 'Good-bye, good-bye.'

'Good-bye, my fairy.'

He held his hat high above his head, and Hilary could see that his face had lighted up. How dearly he loved her—this little fragile being—with all the strength of his silent, great, steadfast heart; loved her for the past, more even than for the present. Hilary had sometimes seen him stroke her head, and call her in a whisper by her mother's name. Yes, for him to love once, was to love for ever. His was one of those rare natures whose treasure of affection once bestowed, could be resumed no more. He was capable of accepting no substitute, no successor to the one lost love. Hilary understood him, for her nature, in part, resembled his. He and she and old Bill were all alike—

‘Faithful and treu.’ Half aloud she repeated the shepherd’s words. Yes, she could be that, she knew—‘faithful and treu’ like the poor dead sheep-dog yonder, with his honest heart of love, whose master cared less for him than for the cheese and bacon left in the corner cupboard. Poor old Bill! Men valued things strangely, she thought, not always justly or wisely. Hilary shook her head. It was rather a sad world after all, for floods came and laid happy homesteads waste, and a good many people’s hearts ached, more or less.

By this time they had cleared the flooded lands, and made their way down the canal, and out on to the familiar mere, now lying black and still under the thunder-clouds. What a very close evening it was—breathless and brooding. The voice of the old keeper, talking on without a pause, sounded quite out of place, as if he was breaking the universal pause around them, while Nature, holding her breath, waited for the storm. He was always an indefatigable talker, poor old Wylie! and great on the subject of his wife’s asthma.

‘For we all have our troubles, Miss Hilra’, and there’s my old woman that asthmatical, she’s hampered to get her breath. The damp air, that apploys to the poipes, that’s were ’tis, till she can’t lie down of a night, that she can’t, she fare so choked up o’ her dear inside.’

For a time Hilary, wrapped in her own reflections, did not hear a word he said; but by and by she was roused by her grandfather’s name. What was he saying?—that her grandfather looked sadly—that he told Mrs. Wylie he was not the man he used to be?

Hilary forgot her thoughts; forgot the sultry evening, and the darkening water, forgot her restless little passenger.

“Lawk,” old Mr. Mowbray sa’ to my wife, “we all have our troubles, Mrs. Wylie, every one of us.” “Yes, sir,” she sa’ to him, “I believe as that’s the Gospel treuth. Gentle and simple, we all on us have summat to put away with, and I ha’ allus understood,” she sa’ to him, “as fancied troubles are the hardest to bear.” But, lawk! he du alter won’erful, the old gen’leman du, he be failing fast, Miss

Hilra', that he be. Sort o' times my wife she ha' fritted over that 'ere, for she had been acquainted with him a power o' years. "He's agoing fast," she sa' to me, "and whatever shall we du when we come to want him up at Hithersea?" "Lawk," I sa,' "don't you take on. Pla'se the Lord to take *him*, there'll be Mr. John," I sa', "to come arter him, and he fare a good gen'leman to the poor. So 'ter don't make so much odds if the old gen'leman be took, we shall allus have one of the family in the parish. Not but what he ha'nt got the same way with him, not Mr. John ha'nt, and that's where 'tis—not the same way, surelie. He don't speak so easy." "We all have our troubles, Mrs. Wylie," the old gentleman sa', and so my missus she takes and flows to tears when he come past ours, a'walking aged-like, and looking no matters. Ah, he's agoing fast, Miss Hilra'.'

Hilary's cheeks were growing whiter and whiter; her eyes, dark with horror, stared at the old man; the rudder was held mechanically between her hands. Little Nathalie jumped from one side of the boat to the other, rocking it rather roughly, but Hilary took no heed.

'Grandfather has only got rheumatism,' she gasped with parched lips, but a rush of fear was qverwhelming her. Was it true? Could it be true, and she had never guessed it? 'Agoin' fast!' Grandfather! He was old, yes, he was very old. Like a blow the relentless saying, 'That the young may die, but the old must,' flashed across her brain. What a cruel saying! What would life be worth without grandfather? Oh, why had she left him this afternoon? Why did she ever leave him? Every moment now seemed an age till she could get back to him. They were nearly home now. Yonder was the Grange landing-stage, and then only two fields to run across, and they would be in the cedar walk. She must keep her word to Geoffrey and take little Nathalie home to her tea. After that she would go back to grandfather, and never, never leave him any more.

'Cannot you pull a little harder, Wylie? We are scarcely moving. Are you tired? Yes; I know you are old, too, and it is hot, very hot. Oh, how can I ever have

complained, while I had grandfather ! I will never say that anything in all the world is sad or hard again, as long as I have him—Nathalie, child, take care !’

For, as the boat passed with a gentle crushing sound through a fleet of water-lilies, the child grasped with both hands at the great round leaves and waxen blossoms. And now she was leaning over the side, and dragging the lilies through the water by their long stalks. The air grew more and more sultry : once or twice there was a growl of distant thunder : the stillness was intense ; not a bird was singing. A pike leapt up, and fell back with a heavy splash beneath the surface. Here and there a bee, overweighted by its honey load, on its way home across the mere, had fallen on to the dark oily surface of the water, and was crawling helplessly about. As Nathalie leant over, she made an occasional snatch at one of these bees, trying to catch it, and put it in safety on board a lily leaf.

‘Geoffrey would say I was very kind,’ she observed complacently to Hilary, who, distraught with her sudden woe and terror, looked on at the child’s proceedings without seeing them.

‘Faster, Wylie ! We shall never get home ! I wish I had not left grandfather alone this afternoon. He——.’

She was interrupted by a sharp little cry from Nathalie. A big bumble-bee had just fallen on to the water a little way beyond her lily leaves. She clutched at it—overbalanced herself—there was a cry and a splash. Hilary flung herself recklessly over the boat’s side. Old Wylie lost his presence of mind, and tried to hold her back. In a moment the boat had capsized, and they were all in the water. The shore was not far off—within a stone’s-throw, indeed ; but between it and them there grew a thick tangle of reeds, and bulrushes, and water-lilies, and where the boat floated keel upwards the mere was one or two and twenty feet deep.

Hilary was a good swimmer—an unusually strong swimmer for a girl, but she was encumbered with clothes, and little Nathalie was helpless. How she accomplished it she knew not ; but as the child rose to the surface Hilary

managed to seize her frock, and, clinging with one arm to the overturned boat, kept her head for some minutes above water. Still a glassy length of purple water, which might just as well have been a mile long, stretched between them and safety.

She saw Rover splashing round her, open-mouthed and over-anxious to help; then she saw him turn and swim rapidly towards the shore. Old Wylie, talking still, was clinging to the other side of the boat.

'Can't you manage to help the child, Wylie?' she gasped breathlessly.

'Bless you, no, Miss Hilrà; I niver was nothin' of a swimmer in my best days.'

From far off there sounded the report of a gun. Hilary remembered suddenly that Laurence meant to shoot rabbits on the island that evening. But he was half a mile away—their voices could not reach him.

Six o'clock struck. The chimes from Wildenhall Church came floating to them clearly and airily. Then the six grave strokes rang calmly over the water.

Six o'clock. Nathalie's tea-time.

'Geoffrey,' dreamily thought Hilary—'Geoffrey said little Nat was not to be late for tea. Would she be home—in time—for tea?'

She could not hold on any longer—she must leave go, and sink. Only one more minute. It was growing dark. How heavy—heavy——

Dim lamplight was shining in the room when she awoke, and the shadows of several quietly-moving people were thrown upon the wall. There was a little fire flickering on the hearth; a kettle hissed on the hob. That was the first thing that attracted her attention. A fire in summer-time—a kettle, which looked like the bright little copper tea-kettle from Nathalie's nursery. Then little Nat, thought Hilary, was in time for tea after all. She tried to speak, wondering why only a weak whisper came from her lips.

'Was she very late?' she asked feebly. 'Did Geoffrey say it was too late?'

Some one, Rhona she rather thought, bent down and kissed her, but did not give her any answer.

Hilary roused herself a little more. She wanted her question to be answered, but had no energy to repeat it. Her eyes wandered round the room. The curtains were not drawn. There was purple twilight outside, and a tinge of saffron colour lingered in the west.

This was not her own little room at home, with the white dainty hangings, and the bird-cage in the window. This was one of the old-fashioned, chintz-hung, lavender-scented guest chambers of the Grange. Then, after all, she had brought Nathalie home.

The shadows on the wall moved, and crossed one another. Somebody came in at the door, and up to the bedside. A hand touched her forehead, and was laid upon her wrist. Then the doctor's voice said: 'Ah, we are doing nicely now. Yes, we shall be all right soon!'

Why was the doctor here? she wondered. Not on her account, surely? She was beginning to remember. 'Little Nat,' she whispered, 'is she all right? Dr. Milton—Rhona,' for no one seemed to hear—the doctor was pouring something into a glass—'is little Nat all right too?'

'Yes, yes,' he answered hurriedly, 'of course, only, hush—she is in there.'

'In her nursery?'

'Ay, in her nursery, to be sure. Come, drink this.'

She pushed the glass aside. 'Is little Nat asleep?'

There was the same momentary hesitation which had struck her before, and then Rhona answered: 'Fast asleep, Hilary.'

She raised herself in her bed, and fixed her eyes in a strange wild way on Rhona, lifting up her hand and pointing stiffly at the wall.

'Nathalie is drowned.'

Some one went away hastily and shut the door. Voices whispered hurriedly, and one said: 'It's not much use trying to keep it from her,' then Mr. Heathcote appeared from behind the curtain, clearing his throat vehemently, 'Try to be a good girl, Hilary,' he began, with a husky

attempt at firmness, 'you really must compose yourself,' and he laid his hand on her shoulder. She dashed it away.

'Does Geoffrey know that little Nat is drowned?'

'My child! Hilary, dear'—Rhona tried to hold her down as she struggled to rise.

'Geoffrey! Geoffrey! Geof-frey!' the cry upon his name grew louder each time—more shrill—with a wilder thrill of anguish, till it ended by dwelling on the last syllable in a sort of scream.

'Oh, don't—don't call him now. He is with her.'

Hilary fell back. She asked no more questions, and turned her face to the wall, as one who refuses to be comforted. Once or twice she shivered and moaned; but her head was buried on her arm, and they tried vainly to make her move, or give some sign of hearing when they spoke to her.

It was the zeal of her faithful Rover which had saved her. Laurence and one of the keepers, strolling leisurely home along the shore after their rabbit-shooting, heard volleys of frenzied barking from the water, and noticed a great rustling, and waving, and swaying to and fro among the reeds. A few minutes more and it would have been too late. Directly the dog saw that he had attracted their attention, he turned and swam back like mad towards the open water. So Rover brought timely help to his mistress. Old Wylie was found clinging to the keel of the drifting boat, and still, though very faintly, talking. Only Geoffrey Heathcote's little ward had gone away, beyond all help. It was no fear, no suspense, but a dread certainty, that met him on his return home. When she had been disengaged from Hilary's arms, which were found closely wrapped round her, and Laurence carried her to the Grange, one little hand still tightly grasped the stalk of a water-lily, and a crushed bumble-bee dropped from between her fingers, as they gently drew away the flower. Hilary's question was not so hard to answer. She did look 'fast asleep' as they laid her on her bed.

'And Geoffrey,' so his brother Dick said, 'took it very quietly, which was such a mercy.' Dick himself was the

more agitated of the two, at first. It was so hard to force Geoffrey to believe what he could not see for himself. Once convinced that hope was indeed over, he only asked to be left alone to watch beside the child. And all night he paced the room, or knelt at her bedside, now and then bending suddenly forward to listen with a beating heart, in the momentary delusion that he heard her breathe, and then as quickly dispelling the wild, vain hope, by touching the little marble hand.

They left him there in peace. Indeed the next day, and for many days, the thoughts and fears and anxious hopes of all the household were centred on Hilary. To her trance of silent despair, there succeeded the delirium of fever—burning fever which in a short space brought her down to the very gates of death. As long as her strength lasted, she talked incessantly, all through the long days and nights. Her wanderings were not always sorrowful to listen to. Sometimes she was driving with her grandfather across the heath to Wildenhall Church, and condoling with him because the rain had spoilt his hay. ‘But we all have our troubles, grandfather, Wylie says, old and young alike.’ That phrase was very often repeated: ‘We all have our troubles, grandfather.’ Or Scamp and she were ferreting in the tithe-barn, and she grew frightened as she said it was filling—filling fast with water, and there was no way of escape. But at other times she raved wildly, calling on Geoffrey’s name, and for ever fancying she was trying to get away from him. It was always water that cut off her retreat, water that came rushing across her path, and that she was afraid to cross, for ‘I am such a coward,’ she moaned, ‘such a coward—Geoffrey knows I am.’

Once when she had been wearily rambling on like this for hours, they tried the experiment of bringing Geoffrey to her bedside, in the hopes of calming her. She knew him directly, but recoiled from him, cowering down and hiding her face in an anguish of terror.

‘Oh, he is looking at me. Ask him to take his eyes off me—I cannot bear his eyes.’

'Dear Hilary,' whispered Rhona, in pain for both of them. 'You forget——'

'Never fear, poor child,' he added in his gentle voice. 'I cannot see you.'

'Oh, but you can! He can see *me*. Rhona, I know he can see me.'

She was shuddering from head to foot.

'This will never do,' the doctor said, drawing Geoffrey away. 'The sight of you seems to excite her, it only does her harm; you had better not stay now.' And Geoffrey, too sad and restless to care much whether he went or stayed anywhere, left the room obediently.

In time the delirium died gradually away. They called her better for a time, after it was gone—a great deal better and stronger; but low fever still hung about her, and by slow degrees it undermined her strength. She seemed to have lost all wish to rouse herself, and as the weeks ran on, bringing the memory of the past clearly back to her, she lay for the most part silent and listless, giving brief gentle answers to those about her, but seldom caring to speak of her own accord.

By and by she was up again, and for hours each day she sat passively near the open window. According to her anxious host, she was rapidly getting well—people always did get well when once they were out of bed. Every day he walked in, rubbing his hands, obstinate and cheery, to tell her that her roses were coming back—they should have her out again before the end of the week. Far from that, however, experienced people knew that she was wasting away—day by day—quickly fading before their eyes. She would not eat—that dashed the rising hopes of Uncle Dick more than anything, and began to frighten him at last. 'For when a person utterly refuses good nourishing food, you know——' and he shook his head despondently.

Hilary's weak, white hands—those hands which used to be so brown, and strong, and busy—lay idly on her lap before her, and her eyes were cast down wearily upon them.

'The mainspring of her life seems somehow broken,' said the doctor impatiently. 'It can't be all from that

plunge in the water. Can't you tell what ails her? 'This sombre, quiet, brooding grief of hers is the sort that kills, let me tell you. It is like a possession. Will nothing rouse her?' No, nothing. She let them come and go about her chair unnoticed. Once or twice when they ventured to mention little Nathalie or Geoffrey in her presence, she writhed and wrung her hands, bowing herself like one in bitter pain. 'But, of course,' said the doctor, 'that's not the kind of rousing I mean—that is worse still than the apathy. It just exhausts the little strength she has. I can do nothing, as long as she will not second me.'

'Dear me! dear me! do you hear, Geoff? If only we could prevail on her to eat, we should be all right. Only to think of Hilary starving herself for grief—little Hilary! Well, I never knew how much she cared for the poor dear child that's gone, did you? I even had a notion, Heaven forgive me,' added honest Dick, 'that she was just a trifle jealous of her. Shows how wrongly one is apt to judge, don't it? I knew she was always fond of animals and children, poor dear. She liked all young things, puppies and ducklings and so forth, you remember, Geoff. (I wonder if she could fancy a very young, tender chicken, by the bye, for her dinner. I must ask Rhona.) Yes, she always cared for everything young and weak.'

He was deeply concerned, was poor Dick Heathcote. He knew absolutely nothing about illness, but he was full of suggestions and new resources, that one after another had to be set aside, or which, being tried to please him, proved dismal failures. Hilary's nurses found him rather harassing. She was to be roused, to be kept quiet—to be amused, scolded, petted, reasoned with, reproofed, all by turns. He even took the reproving into his own hands, and a very lame affair indeed it turned out; for Hilary just lifted her heavy eyes to his face, and smiled, in no wise resenting the reproof, but sending its giver posting out of the room quicker than he came, with an odd choking in his throat.

'You should adopt a new method with her, Rhona, altogether. You should reason with her. I made a bad fist of it myself somehow, but I could not help it. Never in all

my days did I see such eyes in a girl's head ; but you might put things before her. Tell her it is not right, it is downright wrong, to grieve over-much. We must bow to the Divine decree—we really must. We must acquiesce in the dispensations of Providence. I am sure poor Geoff here does with his whole heart, and no one could be fonder of the child than he was. But he just submits to the inevitable without making any fuss—eats his dinner quietly, and is thankful for the mercies which remain. Fretting won't bring her back, Geoff, will it ?'

'No, Dick, no.'

'You see, Rhona, a thing once done can never be undone—can't you put it to her in that light ? There's no use in crying over spilt milk—tell her that is how Geoffrey looks at it. Reason with her. Speak sharply even if it is needful. We must save the child's life, Rhona, by hook or by crook.'

Rhona half smiled. She was not afraid yet for Hilary's life, and was slower even than Uncle Dick in taking the alarm. To her ears then, and for long afterwards, the mention of such fears seemed but as idle words. Little Hilary, young, strong, tireless Hilary ! so overflowing with vivid life, so bright and brave, and proud of her courage, had always been to Rhona as the very incarnation of beautiful, blooming youth. She could not have lost her hold on life so quickly. Surely its vigorous principle would soon begin to reassert itself within her. But the tale of weary days and restless, sleepless nights, lengthened out behind her, and the turning in the long lane did not come. She would certainly be downstairs to-morrow—next week she would be out of doors ; but to-morrow came, and many morrows followed, and the move was always put off for just another day. And by that time Rhona's heart began to fail. Even old Wylie, bound after his long immersion in the mere to have an attack of acute rheumatism—even he had struggled up again, and tottered out stiffly into his little garden ; but Hilary just stayed on where she was. Until Uncle Dick had gathered in the first b'oom of his roses—until the evenings began to grow a little shorter, and the year ripened towards the rich September days. Until one glowing August afternoon, when Dick

Heathcote, fussing in busy idleness over his brilliant flower-beds, stopped every now and then to shake his head and sigh, glancing up at yonder shaded window, whence the flood of sunbeams, and the fresh scented air, was inhospitably shut out.

'She will slip through your fingers some of these fine days,' the doctor had said only this morning, 'if you can't get her to pull herself together.'

Rhona and Laurence had gone out together, and Hilary was just now alone in the little sitting-room upstairs. How would it be, if he went up now, while she was by herself, and made one great final effort to get her to pull herself together? Why not?

The sun, declining towards the west, was beginning to throw soft long shadows from the cedar-trees, and to draw out tints of more splendid colour from the flowers. That dazzling bed of scarlet geraniums—those golden masses of calceolaria (Uncle Dick loved violent contrasts), Hilary must be changed, indeed, if the sight of them failed to cheer her. No sooner said than done, armed with a basket of peaches, with the downy crimson bloom fresh on them, he entered the room on tiptoe.

'Hilary, my love, the most glorious afternoon! and such fine peaches—just eat one, my love,' very casually; 'I came up to see if you would not like to have your blind up, and to look a bit about you,' and, as he spoke, he drew it up with a jerk to the very top, letting in a flood of slanting sunbeams through the window. Hilary shaded her eyes quickly with her hand.

'Dazzles you at first? Ah, I shouldn't wonder,' and he flung the lattice wide. 'That's what comes of living in the dark, you see—won't do at all. You must just pull yourself together, Hilary, and turn over a new leaf. It really is high time. Eat your peach, child, and let us make a fresh beginning—quite a fresh beginning, eh? You are brave enough to do anything, if once you set your will to it.'

'Brave!' said Hilary, letting fall her hand. 'I, brave?'

'To be sure you are, I should think so—rather. Brave? Yes; brave as a lion, Hilary. Why, you have the most

courage of any child I know, and so Geoffrey thinks. We were speaking of it only to-day. That's why it vexes us both so much to see you giving way now.'

'Where is Geoffrey?' Hilary rose abruptly, and stood with one hand on the back of her chair.

'Geoffrey? Out there in the garden, sitting under the lime-trees, all by himself, poor old chap!—you can see him if you look out. In old days you would not have left him to sit there by himself, and he so sad, too, about little Nat, and all. Hilary, what are you going to do? Hilary, my dear'—for Uncle Dick having apparently succeeded at last in rousing Hilary, was frightened out of his wits.

'Did Geoffrey say I was brave?'

'Yes, of course he did.'

'I want you to call him here,' said Hilary, sinking back into her chair. 'Please call Geoffrey from the window, and ask him to come here.'

'Dick was considerably flustered, but he obeyed and shouted for his brother lustily: 'I say, Geoff, just come up here for a moment; look sharp. Hilary wants you—just come up at once.—You are not doing too much, are you, Hilary? Shouldn't you—er—lie down or something?—just have a little rest before he comes.'

'She shook her head; and when she heard Geoffrey's step, she stood up again, and made two steps to meet him. He came in, and she held out her hand impulsively towards him, as if to keep him at a little distance.

'Captain,' she said, 'I want to speak to you.'

He could not see her, as she stood straight and tall before him, her hands clasped and dropped in front of her, and the sunlight at her back. But Dick, hovering nervously between them, was aware of a strange, sad loveliness about her. Her hair was unbound, and, as in her childish days, fell in a tawny, glittering mass down to her waist. The loose white dress she wore swept on to the floor in soft long folds. Even her intense emotion had brought no tinge of colour into her cheeks, only her great eyes shone and glowed with living light. She began in a low, even voice:

‘Captain, I want to tell you the truth. I cannot die till I have told the truth.’

‘Bless me, don’t talk of dying, child.’ But she waved Uncle Dick aside, not impatiently, but with the unconscious power of wrought-up feeling.

‘You have never heard how Nathalie was drowned—no one else can tell you about it—only I. You said I was brave, captain. Then listen. They have told you that the boat was overturned’—she lifted up her head and spoke quietly, looking straight before her all the time, as if what she described was even now before her eyes—‘it was near the water-lily-bed—that deep place where the reeds grow close to the shore; I have heard you say the water is two and twenty feet deep just there. Nathalie clutched at me directly I was in the water, and we went down together. Then I felt that we were slowly rising to the top again, and I had got my arms round her. Rover was splashing round us with his fore-paws, and barking, and then he swam away, and I heard Wylie calling out for help. The boat, upside down, was near us, but it was drifting away—I saw it, keel upwards, a yard or two away. I knew our only chance was to hold on by it. My clothes were dragging me down, and I could hardly keep Nat’s head above the water. I said, “Don’t be frightened, little Nat, and I will save you.”—Geoffrey! I broke my word.’ A gasping sob broke from her, and she paused.

Dick Heathcote opened his mouth to speak, but something in her face stopped him. She began again: ‘I tried to get hold of the boat with one hand, but I only pushed it—it slipped away—I was sinking again, and oh! I could not reach it unless I let go of Nathalie. The boat was moving fast, and she got heavier—I saw all your faces—grandfather’s, and yours—and I saw the farmyard at the Grange—’

Suddenly Hilary sank upon her knees.

‘Captain, I let her go. I caught hold with both hands of the boat as it was drifting out of reach, and held on to it with all my might. Then I turned round to get hold of Nat again—and she was gone. She rose again—once

more—nearer the reeds—but—I wanted to live—and I hated the choking, horrid feeling of the water—I waited for a minute or two longer, clinging to the keel—I don't think it was for long—I don't know—but it was too late. Do you hear, Geoffrey?—it was too late. She sank as I snatched her frock—we went down, both of us, among the weeds—cold, slimy, long things. I suppose I came up alone—I can't tell you—I did not see Nathalie any more after I let her drown.'

She stopped, and stood staring at Geoffrey's face—he had put his hand up to his head. 'There was a dead silence.

'You could not have done more,' said Geoffrey presently, in a thick, hurried voice; 'no woman could have done more.'

She smiled; it seemed to Dick Heathcote a ghastly smile, with her ashy lips.

'If you had been there,' she said, still in that terribly quiet tone, 'you would have saved her.'

'I? poor blind log. I could only have drowned with her.'

'I did not drown with her, I let her drown alone—your pretty Nat, Geoffrey.'

'No, your arms were round her, you tried to do your best,' he struggled to say.

'You see that I am a coward? You quite see that?'

'No, no; you did your best. You tried to get to her. It was God's will——'

'Good heavens, child, don't look like that,' broke in Uncle Dick. 'No matter whether you were a coward or not, he forgives you, Hilary. Oh, Hilary, he forgives you.'

'Forgives!' with a sharp cry of passionate despair. 'Who wants him to forgive? I daresay he forgives—but he knows I let her drown, because I am a coward.'

'Geoff, for the love of Heaven, speak to the poor child!'

'No. Hush! wait. I have not told the worst. Oh, wait. Captain, there came a vision to me, under the water, of our old days—before she came—when you used to lean on my shoulder, and we went about everywhere together, and I thought if Nat was gone—oh, I cannot say it—but I thought, I know I did——'

‘Hilary, come here.’

Very low and broken was Geoffrey’s voice. ‘Hilary, child, come here.—Somebody bring her to me,’ he added impatiently, as she shrank away from his groping hand.

‘Don’t! I drowned your pretty Nat.’

But he caught her hand, and held it to his breast, and she heard him breathing hard and quick, and saw the red flush on his forehead.

‘God help you, child; God help us both,’ he said.

‘I am glad I told you,’ whispered Hilary with a strange smile. ‘I should not like to have died without your knowing. I wish,’ very dreamily, ‘I wish now, that—I had never been jealous of poor little Nat,’ and so saying she swayed backwards, and fell heavily into Dick’s outstretched arms.

CHAPTER XVII

‘Clear shining after rain.’

GEOFFREY HEATHCOTE went away by himself, with the tones of that pleading and pathetic voice ringing in his ears.

He was better out of the way. They told him to go. Blind and helpless, he could do no good. Dick even hustled him out of the room as soon as other help had come, and all that was possible was being done to recover Hilary out of the deathlike swoon into which she had fallen.

‘But I believe it is all for the best,’ Dick, himself terribly frightened, kept repeating; ‘all for the best, Rhona. She is coming round—surely she is coming round—and then we shall be all right. The child’s heart was full, that was what ailed her; and now she has had it out with Geoffrey, and he has forgiven her—though as far as I can make out there was nothing earthly to forgive; still, it was just as great a comfort to her as if there had been. And now her mind is at ease, and she will get on like a house on fire. You just wait a bit,’ said poor Uncle Dick, obstinately and resolutely hopeful, ‘and you’ll see her pull herself together. Opening her eyes, is she? To be sure—yes, of course she is. I told you so, Geoff; you just keep out of the way for a bit, and we shall have good news for you in less than no time.’

Geoffrey made his way with a great sense of relief into the open air. Nature, with her sweet silences, her subtle sympathy, had been his counsellor and comforter for years. Oppressed and half stunned, he longed now for her quieting touch. Already there was peace in the breath of freshness that met him on the threshold, and told him how evening

was softening the light, and toning down the passionate splendour of the flowers.

He needed calmness and silence, for Hilary's despairing cry followed him everywhere, and he could not escape from it: 'I let your pretty Nat drown—there by the lily-bed.'

And this was the horror of it—that he knew his answers to her had been slow and grudging. He could not make them otherwise. With a shock of surprise he realised that the soft words Dick claimed from him for Hilary were very hard to speak. It was no question of forgiveness. He had nothing to forgive. Yet his brother's voice urging him to speak quickly and comfort her, found a tardy echo within him. His pretty Nathalie! the evening star that had risen to lighten his darkness—the one ewe-lamb who was to him as a daughter—his pretty Nathalie, drowned by the lily-bed!

The words were beaten in upon his brain as with the strokes of a hammer. He spoke them out loud to the quietly waving trees, the dewy flowers: 'Drowned! my pretty Nathalie!' and then he forced himself to add: 'It was God's will—there is no one to be blamed.' Back again the next moment came the maddening reiteration: 'Drowned by the lily-bed!' followed by those other words: 'I did not drown with her—I let her drown alone.'

It was horrible—horrible—utterly ungenerous and unmanly, to bring up her own reckless, honest words against her—the poor brave girl whose grief was killing her. And yet the haunting picture they had called up came and stood before his eyes, and he was powerless to dispel it. It harrowed his very soul with a passion of pity and yearning—that picture of the little drowning child, with her fair face slowly sinking down among the lilies, and her small outstretched hands clutching vainly after the support that had been withdrawn. Oh! to have been there to grasp them in his—the little cold hands—to lift her up, and gather her to his heart in safety and warmth. But she had been allowed to sink, far, far down where the weeds grew thick, and the water struck deadly chill—his little Nathalie!

Wylie's vague and confused account of the accident failed to explain how instantly Hilary flung herself over the

boat-side, risking her life without a moment's hesitation. Hilary herself had forgotten that—forgotten all except her failure of courage. Geoffrey had only her story to go upon. The horror of it! The mere thought of the little child's pain and mortal fear—of her death-struggle, utterly unmanned him. During the weeks that had just passed he had found it hard to submit to the decree that tore from him his last, late-found happiness. The battle was sore and fierce before his rebel will was conquered, and laid once more a willing sacrifice at the feet of the Master. But he had believed that the victory was won for good and all. 'Surely,' he said to himself, 'the bitterness of death is passed.' After the long fight peace had dawned on him—that peace which, as we are told, 'passeth all understanding.' It enfolded and wrapped him round, divinely filling up all earthly void. Now suddenly the voices of the storm were again uplifted round him. Temptation assailed him in its rudest and most primitive form, anger, horror, bitter resentment, and regret. He could only bow his head before the blast in silence.

And poor Hilary, with the intuition of affection, was intensely conscious of the impression her words made on him. She felt the keen thrill of his suffering—understood, too, his agony of pity. It was the thought of it that fairly broke her heart. For his forgiveness she cared very little. Forgiveness! She knew well he forgave. It was not that she wanted. She remembered trying to tell Dick so, just as everything darkened before her eyes, and the surging waters seemed to close again over her head. Life came back to her slowly and reluctantly.

Why did they not let her die in peace, she wondered, since it hurt her so much to live? But youth and strength strove hard for the mastery, and for a little while it seemed as if they might prevail. It was her duty to live, so Dick Heathcote, and the doctor, and John Mowbray, were always telling her in their different ways.

John Mowbray was at Hithersea. By one of those strange contradictions of feeling that are so often seen in life, Hilary accepted her absence from her grandfather

almost with indifference. Who that had witnessed her misery when old Wylie first roused her fears about him could have believed that the thought of him would weigh on her so lightly? Who knows? Perhaps she felt that she should not be long parted from him.

• 'You ought to get well for his sake,' said Uncle Dick severely.

'Dear grandfather!' the girl answered with her faint, wan smile.

Her place was oddly filled by John Mowbray; but he did his best, and even talked of giving up his London work altogether, and coming to devote himself to his uncle and the two parishes—talked of it with grim resignation and distaste, for his heart was in his grimy City alleys, and among their hunger-stricken inmates. However, here he was, looking after the old man, 'like any daughter,' said the unobservant critic at the Grange. 'Very unlike a daughter,' amended the more discerning, 'but like a good, earnest, conscientious man, who is accustomed to accept uncomplacingly the duty that lies nearest to his hand.' Geoffrey, also, had betaken himself to Hithersea. The old archdeacon loved him, and clung to him in his feebleness, and the wild melancholy of the spot was just what suited him.

Weeks slipped away. Life, both at Hithersea and the Grange, had fallen into a dull and dreary routine, that poor Uncle Dick found very hard to bear.

One night Rhona had been watching by Hilary's bed, and the hours passed in weary wandering and restlessness. When the doctor came in the early morning she was lying very quietly, with her wistful eyes wide open, and her bright short hair was tossed back on the pillow. It was only a few days ago that they had taken heart to cut off that splendid mass of wavy hair that always seemed an essential part of Hilary, sharing in all her moods, a very portion of her character. Her young face looked sadly forlorn and childish without it—a little Samson shorn of her glory and her strength. The doctor stood looking down at her compassionately. He was a very clever man, rather a new-

comer in the neighbourhood, a little rough and abrupt in manner, but up in all the latest developments of science.

‘Yes, the fever is lessening. Poor little maid!’

‘Is she better then?’

He did not answer, and Rhona looking up at him, saw that for the moment he really could not speak. Generally he took refuge in severe scolding. It was exasperating to him to see the child lying there, gentle, patient, uncomplaining, and yet to know that she was silently breaking her heart, because she thought that she had been a coward, and her ideal of herself was shattered. The thing was unreasonable—rebellious—childish. It showed an utter want of common-sense. No one had a right thus to fling away God’s good gift of life; besides he had grown deeply interested in her case—had set his heart on saving her, but now it seemed that, like Elaine, ‘being so very wilful, she must die.’ Yes, the fever was leaving her, and there was no rally. He laid her hand down gently on the coverlid. To-day he could not find it in his heart to scold her.

Rhona was very tired. Seeing that the gruff doctor was nearly overcome, her own courage quite gave way. As she followed him down into the hall, she felt weak and forlorn, and afraid to face the future.

Life is full of abrupt changes—its lights and shadows shift, and vanish quickly. Then and there it came to pass that Rhona’s life received its crown of gladness. After the heavy night, joy came to her in the morning. There, under the shade of the porch, stood Adrian Mowbray, whom she had not seen since the day, which seemed so very long ago, when Denis Delorme took her to look at his picture at the Abbey, and Hilary told them how she scorned a coward.

The doctor went away; Adrian was close to her with both hands held out.

‘My poor love!’

‘Oh!’ she said with a quick, sobbing breath, ‘you have come back.’

‘You were in such trouble, I could not stay away.—You are not sorry?’

'Oh no—no.'

A strong, clear breath of sunny morning air seemed to have come in with him. Rhona could have cried and laughed at once. It was such a new thing to be happy—almost a wrong thing, only she could not help herself.

'Poor little Hilary is so ill,' she said half reproachfully.

'Yes. I know. I have seen John. But, Rhona, I have travelled night and day to see your face. Just let me be glad for a minute. Let me look at you.'

'Oh, it is all so sad. We ought not to be glad.'

'But we can't help ourselves, Rhona. And—Rhona, you are going to trust me at last. You need not be afraid.' He drew her within his arms. 'John says you need not be afraid,' he repeated, with a half laugh, 'Rhona.'

She looked up into his face, but she could hardly see it, the tears were blinding her, the clasp of his arm was so strong and comfortable. Trust him! Who in the world so much? She put her hand up to his shoulder, and laid her head down on it with a sigh of content, not caring to ask one question.

The rest of that morning always remained like a dream in Rhona's memory.

This dazzling sunrise of joy, breaking in on the sorrowful darkness—the real sun that poured into the hall, and wrapped them in a sort of glory as they stood together in one of the deep windows—Uncle Dick's blundering in on them presently, and falling into a bewilderment of embarrassment, and surprise, and satisfaction, in the midst of which he suddenly recollected his great sorrow.

'We shall lose Hilary—we shall lose you all. You will be going away too, Rhona. Whatever can we do, Geoff and I, when we are left all alone? Everything that was young and bright is drifting away from the poor old Grange.'

'My dear old neighbour——' Adrian was trying to console him, when John's voice was heard.

'I say,' whispered Uncle Dick, smiling through his grief; 'old John's hair will stand on end! Won't he just open his eyes? I wouldn't miss seeing John's face for a hundred pounds.'

But John had already given his consent, and his austere congratulations, though perfectly cordial and sincere, fell rather flat. Poor Dick relapsed into despondency,

Strangest of all to Rhona was the going back, with this new happiness enfolding her, into the darkened room upstairs, and finding all unchanged there—Hilary lying passively silent—the persistent sunbeams forcing in their unwelcome way, gaily bursting through every keyhole and cranny—Mrs. Somerville sitting near her with a book upon her knee, now and then reading a few quieting and hopeful words, that were as unheeded as the sunbeams.

‘Life and death, life and death,
Such is the song of human breath.’

The words haunted Rhona. ‘Must it indeed be so? Life for her—life crowned with hope and joy, but death for little Hilary.’

Rhona almost grudged herself a glimpse into that land of promise which the child was not to enter with her.

For the doctor was not mistaken, there was very little power of rallying. Dick, even, was fain to confess it. She got no farther than the sitting-room upstairs.

Dick had got a plan of his own in his head, a deep-laid plan, which he was minded to keep religiously to himself, lest he should be exhorted to relinquish it. He was not going to give up without a struggle the hope of bringing back youth and sunshine to the Grange. He thought he saw a way. Perhaps the great look of happiness on Adrian Mowbray's grave face turned Neighbour Dick's thoughts in the direction they were taking.

Every day he went over to visit Geoffrey at Hithersea, carrying with him the same melancholy report. Every day his colours became a shade more sombre. For Geoffrey was slow of apprehension. His blindness kept him ignorant of a great deal that was passing round him. So much is learnt by a look, a gesture, the momentary expression of a face. It was long before he took in any fear of danger; longer still before his brother could get him to understand the idea he wanted to inspire him with.

'Surely you don't fear for her life?' he asked, startled at last. 'No one thinks she is likely to die?'

'Don't they though? It's on the cards, I can tell you. Not but what a little happiness might save her yet, I take it—a little happiness, Geoff. Just think of that!'

'Happiness!'

'Yes.'—A long pause, very anxious on Dick's part, thoughtful and perplexed on Geoffrey's.—'Only a little happiness.' Dick's voice had a shy, pleading tremble in it. 'The poor child!—It's a queer thing, old man, uncommonly queer, but Hilary certainly is very fond of you.'

Geoffrey made no answer.

'Girls do take such out-of-the-way fancies into their heads, you know.'

'Do they?'

'As long as you had little Nathalie with you, she never put herself forward, you will allow that. But I thought perhaps now——'

'Geoffrey stopped him with a gesture. He sat on the low wall of the vicarage garden, leaning forward, with his hands clasped over his stick. There was a deep fold of pain between his eyes. Hilary sick, and like to die! Little Hilary! God would surely be merciful to them all, and spare that bright young life!

If fervent wishes—if earnest prayers could save her, Geoffrey would spend his days in supplication. God, in pity, would spare them this crowning sorrow.

Dick, fidgeting round him, strained his ears to try and catch the words that Geoffrey kept muttering under his breath. It was only a line or two of George Herbert's that had come into his head—

'Throw away Thy rod,
Throw away Thy wrath,
O my God,
Choose the gentle path.'

Only poetry! thought Dick. It was all very well to quote poetry, but, as far as his experience went, nothing practical ever came of poetry.

'You will turn what I have been saying over in your mind, Geoffrey, won't you?'

'Dick,' said Geoffrey, lifting up his head, 'I will pray for her.'

'Ah, just so, just so. I hope you will.'

But Dick presently departed rather crestfallen. And Geoffrey still sat on the wall. 'The gentle path!' Hilary's feet seemed made for paths of eager work and loving service. The gentle path for her would surely mean the path of life. 'A little happiness would save her,' Dick said. Then with what costly price could happiness be bought for little Hilary?

Geoffrey recalled the 'queer thing,' the 'uncommonly queer thing,' that Dick had hinted at. Had he been blind—doubly blind? He began to see what Dick was driving at. Had he been treating lightly the generous, pitying love that gave so much, and asked so little in return—that only cared to serve—he knew it now—that was ready to give youth, and beauty, and strength, and brightness to a blighted man? And he had been minded to sacrifice it all, to the cruel memory of one who had never loved him.

A few days afterwards he went back to the Grange.

There were people constantly coming and going now in the room where Hilary lay, very quiet and silent, but with a little weary smile for every one. John visited her every day, and Dick, and sometimes Adrian Mowbray.

'Will you and Rhona let Scamp live with you?' she said one day to Adrian. 'He mustn't come here, because he used to frighten Nathalie. Nobody likes Scamp much, I am afraid, except dear grandfather, and he won't want him long.'

'Poor old Scamp! He shall have the best of everything; but I don't think he will be happy, Hilary.'

'No; will you comfort him? Rover,' and she stroked the black head that was never far from her elbow. 'Rover is going to try and be a friend to the captain, if he can; I know he will do his very best.'

The liquid brown eyes looked up fondly at her. When first she was ill they used to be full of expectation and perplexity. Would the little mistress never jump up, and

give him his run in the sunshine? But the eager light had quite died out now. He understood; there was nothing left in his faithful heart but love.

Tokens of affection were showered down on Hilary. Quaint and precious offerings were always being left at the back door of the Grange. Squashed blackberries tied up in red handkerchiefs, fresh eggs, ragged bunches of wild flowers and field grasses; once a very young, blind kitten arrived in a basket—'Miss Hilra was allus so fond of kittens.' The Hithersea folk used to waylay John to ask after the 'little mawther.'

'Would you like to send her a message?' John asked of old Wylie, who still hobbled along beside him, one morning, after he had heard that there was 'very little change the last day or two.'

'Noo, noo. Nothin' much of a missage. Leastways, I don't care if you du tell her we think of her a sight, me and my missus. You can tell her we all have our troubles—young and old; but the Lord He fare merciful.'

'Thank you, Wylie. I hope she knows it.'

'I believe she du. Merciful, He fare, and loving—so they tell me. I usn't to hold o' love, not I. I used to enjoy the t'reatenins up at the chapel o' the fen. Lauk! I used to like to sit and shake o' my shues, that I did. That cre preachin' chap—he were a shumaker, I believe, by trade—he'd take and poonish of the poolpit-cushion tìll I see the dust a flyin' out o' Sundays, all along of them t'reatenings—but, bless you, that fare as tho' it'd fatague me now, since the old woman were troubled o' her poipes along o' the asthma; and the little mawther yonder a goin' fast, they say. It seems as though I thought love was the best thing, arter all.'

And so it is. Love is best after all. Very gently it seemed that the 'little mawther,' so full still of earth's love, and pride, and pain, was being guided towards the Love Divine.

Geoffrey spent much time in her room, ever watching and listening intently, striving with painful effort to find out about her for himself.

The first day she saw him, Hilary took his hand humbly and kissed it.

'Hilary!' he coloured and drew it hastily away.

She let her own hand drop.

'You know I did not say thank you that day.'

'My child—what for?'

'Oh, because you forgave me—quite forgave me. I was glad, captain!'

The altered sound of her voice told him a great deal. It was so quiet and tired, and hopeless, that it taught him more than many descriptive words from others.

Geoffrey pondered in his silent way, and by degrees he grew to understand her proud humility—her sense of failure—the pathetic childishness and frankness of her repentance. A great longing to comfort her came upon him—of himself he scarcely thought at all. For his own part, he had grown to be content. After the little child, whom he loved with a reflected but a very intense love, was taken from him, his lonely soul had drawn very near its God. There are some lives—singularly bereft, in the goodness and severity of God, of earthly ties—which He gathers to Him, vouchsafing so to reveal Himself to them, as to leave no blank to be filled up. Geoffrey had been suffered by the Master not only to clasp His feet in adoration, but in tender friendship to grasp His hand. His heart had opened to that sunlight. Henceforth he felt little need of the joys of earth. In 'the secret of the Lord' he rested, and was satisfied.

None the less was he sorely grieved for Hilary, and for the wasted possibilities of her young life. Was it true, he wondered, that the chance lay in his hands of giving her the 'little happiness,' which Dick thought might save her still? It seemed very strange, but it might be so. One day a sudden impulse came over him, and he put the question to her.

Rhona and Adrian were both sitting in the room, he writing in the window, and she sitting silently beside him. Hilary had fallen asleep, but she awoke presently with a start as John Mowbray came in, and stood at the foot of

the couch, looking down on her with a face of sorrowful displeasure.

‘Hilary, you look weaker every day.’

‘Do I?’ she said indifferently.

John had been one of the last to realise how ill she was. Even now he clung to the belief, which one by one the others had relinquished, that only an effort of will was needed for her recovery.

‘You make no attempt to rouse yourself.’

‘Why should I?’

Then Geoffrey spoke abruptly, unheeding the presence of the others :

‘Hilary, would you try to stay with us if I wanted you?’

‘Yes, captain.’

‘You would? Then Hilary—Hilary, try!’

‘But you don’t want me.’

‘Child, child, when I tell you that I want you with all my heart, won’t you believe me?’

‘No, captain,’ with a little wan smile.

‘Hilary!’

He went and knelt on one knee beside her pillow. Hilary put up her hand and softly stroked his cheek.

‘Captain dear, you have forgiven me—isn’t that quite enough for me?’

‘No.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Will you listen to me?’ But Rhona came forward and drew him away.

‘No, no,’ she said. ‘Let her be. Believe me, it is far the happiest for her. Leave her in peace. The heart to live is gone out of her, Geoffrey—she is so disappointed in herself. You cannot cure her poor little heart. She knows you can’t, but I think God Himself is going to bind it up with His own comfort. What comfort can you offer her like His comfort?’

‘I would give her my life,’ he said, in a low voice.

‘Dear Geoffrey, you cannot give her what she wants. Do you think she does not know that?’

He was silent. Hilary raised herself on her couch, and a flush of eagerness came across her face.

‘But look here, Geoffrey, you can comfort me. Shall I

tell you what I really want? Will you promise me something—I want your promise—will you?’

‘I promise, Hilary. What is it?’

‘When the time comes—when I am really just going to die, and you are sure of it, tell it me, Geoffrey—tell it me your own self.’

‘You are asking him a hard thing, Hilary,’ said Rhona, as he turned away from her without speaking.

‘Oh, Rhona, can’t you understand? I was a coward once. I long to make him forget it. I want him to see—I want to show him how bravely I can die——’

‘Hilary,’ interposed John sternly, ‘be silent. You are facing death in a wrong spirit.’

She turned towards him with a gleam of her old defiance. ‘I tell you I do not want to live.’

‘Your life does not lie in your own hands, nor does the manner of your death. And what avails earthly courage and pride, on the brink of the dark river?’ He raised his hand, and spoke solemnly. ‘Was it thus your Master met the shadow, in the Garden of Gethsemane?’

‘John, John, speak gently to her.’

‘No, Rhona, I do not dare speak gently, for “God resisteth the proud.”’

‘Rhona,’ she turned from one to the other with a startled look, ‘does he mean that I am proud? I thought I had grown quite humble, since I found out I was a coward. Am I proud?’

‘Was your request to Geoffrey just now a proof of your humility?’ he asked.

Hilary’s eyes dilated, a quick flush dyed her white cheeks. ‘I see! Oh, John, what shall I do?’

‘Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, Hilary, and ask Him to grant you a broken and a contrite heart.’

There was a deep silence. Hilary clasped her hands over her eyes, one by one the slow tears dropped on to the pillow.

‘I am sorry,’ she whispered at last. ‘John, I am very sorry. Do you think God will forgive?’

He bent over her. 'My child'—who could have guessed John's voice could be so tender?—'my child, He is faithful and just to forgive.'

Adrian quietly went out of the room, as Geoffrey knelt down at the foot of the couch.

And after that day a change came over Hilary. The bitterness of her hard grief passed away. The poor little broken heart was contrite—contrite and forgiven. She forgave herself at last, and was at peace.

'I verily believe,' said Mr. Heathcote, clinging with characteristic pertinacity to the wreck of his old hopes, 'that she might be induced to make an effort now. She looks so sweet and placid, one cannot bear to let her go. It seems such a pity now she seems happy again—eh, doctor?'

The doctor shook his head and whistled. 'Too late! No, you will soon have to let her go.'

And so they had. But it was not so sad as it would have been a while ago. Some gleam of the old Hilary came back—the bright, generous, loving Hilary—once more she grew to love the sunshine, and liked to see it stream across her bed. 'I hope I shall die when it is daylight, and the sun is shining. I should not like to go away in the dark. I think it would frighten me. Tell John,' she added, with a little smile, 'that I do not want to be thought brave any more.'

And it came to pass that Hilary had her wish. In the early morning, but in full sunshine, she 'went away.'

Through the dark hours of the last night she spent on earth she was half wandering, and kept sending messages to Geoffrey, not knowing that he was standing by her side.

'Oh, tell him that I shall wait for him very near the Golden Gate. I shall be sure to be there waiting for him when he comes. May I hold his hand and lead him in as far as I can go? I shall not be able to go half as high as he will, of course; but do you think I may go a little way? But, I forgot—he will see then. No one need lead him. Dear captain, you will see then!' and she smiled, 'in the pure light you will see quite well. How happy I shall be!'

She did not know how fast the tears were streaming from Geoffrey's blind eyes.

And it came to pass that as the day dawned, something that was like a vision was vouchsafed to gladden her. She opened her eyes wide, and looked up.

'The light is shining brightly on the mere. Oh, here comes little Nat! She is holding out her arms to me. She is smiling—she has quite forgiven me. Oh, little Nat, how kind! Thank you—— Geoffrey?'

'Yes, child, yes.'

There was a silence; he heard them moving, and knew the moment had come. Then suddenly he remembered the wish she had withdrawn.

'Hilary!' he said.

'Yes, captain,' holding up her hand eagerly like a child answering a question.

He hesitated and could find no words, till he bethought him of some, which he borrowed from the most divine of all stories of sorrow and compassion—'Hilary, the Master is come, and calleth for thee.'

A faint 'Oh yes!'

Silence again. He listened eagerly, and his strained ear caught a long, tired breath.

'Rhona!' he whispered, grasping her arm tightly.

'Yes. Wait, Geoffrey.'

Some one—Dick, was it?—was crying like a child. Another sigh.

'Poor, pretty little dear!' sobbed Dick, 'her trouble is all over——'

'Rhona—is she——?'

Rhona struggled to speak; she guessed by the shaking of the hand that grasped her arm how hard it was for him.

'Yes, yes.—She looked at you just before—— She was so pleased to tell you about little Nat——'

'Does she—look happy?'

'Oh, Geoffrey, yes; she is beautiful—beautiful: quite white, and radiant—like a lily in the sun.'

'May I kiss her?'

Rhona guided him. He touched the fair little face

first with his big brown finger, very softly stroking it, and then he kissed the brow.

It was not quite a smile that parted Hilary's lips—it was more wonderful than any smile.

'Geoffrey, if you could only see her, you would be comforted ;' for a deep, irrepressible sob shook him from head to foot.

'Poor little dear !' said Dick Heathcote, still crying, as he went about with a basket, hunting for the few lingering pale roses in his garden. 'I never thought it would have been so quiet—so soon over—almost natural it seemed, and yet what a little, young thing it was to die !'

There was scarcely a white rose left—softly-tinted ones of gold and cream colour, rich roses with crimson hearts—but not one white bud.

'It is just as I told you,' said poor Dick ; 'just as I expected—nothing young and sweet left at the poor old Grange !'

And yet it turned out Uncle Dick was wrong.

Next summer brought back the rosebuds, fresh and fair as ever—and other roses too.

One more scene at the old Grange, to show how, after a long winter, the flower of hope bloomed there once again.

See here : the mossy grass of the bowling-green, flecked by the velvet shadows of tall trees—that pleasant old-world sound, the click of bowls—a confusion of merry voices, chiefly children's voices, all talking at once—one or two elders idly looking on. And, walking slowly, side by side, down the green alley leading from the house, come the master of the Grange and Rhona Mowbray.

'Yes, Rhona,' he is saying half-sadly, 'I get the children over as often as ever I can. The Thetfords are very kind about it ; they know things are altered with us here. We old folks are comfortable enough, Rhona, it isn't that. There is nothing to find fault with. Your mother is an angel of peace, and poor Geoffrey is always cheerful ; I verily believe that man is a saint, Rhona. But

as for me,' Uncle Dick brushed his hand across his eyes, 'well, of course, it can't be helped. I am that sort of old boy, you know—the older I get the more I seem to like young faces round me, and children's voices—hark, how they are laughing now!—isn't it pretty and cheerful?' I like to see them all so eager and keen over every little pleasure—if it's only milking the cow. So before the Thetfords went to London they gave me leave to send for the children as often as I please. Laurie rides over and asks for them.'

'And Elsie comes with the little ones?'

'To be sure she does, and glad to come—Elsie is the flower of the flock. They are little dears, all of them, but Elsie is my special friend. I was afraid they would take her to London this season with Clare and Milly—present her, and what not—make a woman of the child; but they left her at Thornton for one year more. She and our Hilary used to like one another; she talks to me of Hilary, remembers her, don't you know? Ah, Rhona, don't it seem hard there should be such a lot of girls at Thornton, and not one here?'

'Uncle Dick,' said Rhona quietly, 'I think you might have that one, if you wanted her very much.'

'What, Elsie? How? Who?'

Rhona pointed across the bowling-green to where a girl was sitting on the edge of the grass, with tree shadows flickering over her, and a sleepy little brother flung across her lap. Laurence was bending down to speak to her, and she was looking up at him.

'Laurence! Oh, Rhona!—Rhona, my dear love!'

And it all came about after a time.

'For,' as Uncle Dick said, balancing tremulously between hope and fear, 'Thetford is a good fellow. He would like to oblige me if he could, and Laurie is as fine a lad as ever stepped; he's as good as a son to me, Rhona, every bit. Besides, he is as good a shot as you will find in the county—and Thetford will like that, eh? so will little Elsie. And the boy really has a noble nature, he's as generous as the day, and so cheery. Elsie might do worse, Rhona, and he

shall have every acre of land, and every penny Geoffrey or I possess. And—and the Grange is rather a quaint old place, some people say, eh, Rhona?’

‘The dearest old place in the world, Uncle Dick.’

Lord Thetford ended by saying, ‘Well, well! Have it your own way. Little Elsie is not out of the schoolroom, and your boy has seen nothing of the world; but you shall have her by and by, as you have set your heart on it. Only mind, my dear old neighbour, I believe her mother says ‘yes’ for your sake, far more than for young Laurence’s.’

So Uncle Dick has taken hope for his companion, and he thinks her exceeding sweet. The past and the present have clasped hands in a fellowship he finds full of charm. The gay laughter and fresh young voices of the future blend tenderly with the softer, holier sounds that float back from long ago; and the roses which are to deck the bride chamber grow on the same tree whose blossoms lie scattered in rich, white profusion, over Hilary’s grave.

Dick Heathcote is unwearied in his preparations. Nothing is good enough for Elsie.

‘We must work hard, Reynolds. Put on a couple more men at once if you want them. There’s no time to lose, or my new azalea beds will not be worth looking at before our little lady comes home.—I say, Reynolds, do you hear? I am thinking of building a new peach-house; Miss Elsie is very fond of peaches——’

The life of Jasper Somerville has never yet been given to the world, and the dean waxes impatient; but none the less is he held, as Rhona knows, in hourly remembrance, and his works do follow him. It was not in the whirlwind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire that God made His glory known to Adrian Mowbray, but rather by a still small voice. He had learnt much by his love for Rhona; by Geoffrey’s patient faith; by the simple old creed repeated in the church. By all these—but more, far more, by those eloquent pages of her father’s writing, that are her most precious heritage. They have long since passed into her husband’s keeping, to be shared in the fulness of time with

others. As month by month he grows wiser in her eyes, more clear-sighted, more large-hearted, she thinks : 'Surely that time has come.'

But he still answers : 'Not yet. Wait, Rhona
And Rhona waits.

THE END

